

EXPLORING THE BEST PRACTICES IN SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING A CRISIS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

“I want to counsel clients how to be resilient during a crisis. When the storm passes, it’s an opportunity to be an even better organization.” – Katie Priebe

Katie Priebe brings years of broadcast TV experience to her role as a crisis management and media relations expert helping national and international organizations protect and strengthen their reputations. Katie’s work includes crisis response, issues planning, media training, local and national media relations, crisis scenario and media coaching, and social media monitoring and analysis. Katie guides organizations through crisis and media training scenarios to be well prepared when a crisis occurs.



Katie offers a unique perspective on how the media operates in a crisis, specifically offering counsel on how to manage crisis response on social media.

Katie started her career as a broadcast television anchor, reporter and content producer. She earned her bachelor’s degrees in broadcast journalism and global & international studies at the University of Kansas William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications, ranked among the top journalism schools in the nation.

Katie’s graduate degree in strategic communications was possible because of the support and love from her family. A sincere thank you is presented to Mike, Sue, Maggie, Mark and Winston Priebe. Thank you for your commitment. Follow Katie on Twitter [@KatiePriebePR](https://twitter.com/KatiePriebePR).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It remains to be understood how organizations should control a crisis situation through social media in order to minimize reputational damage to a company. The purpose of this study is to understand a crisis situation, determine if there are best practices companies can use to control a narrative before, during and after a crisis on social media in order to minimize reputational risk, and provide best-practice recommendations. The primary research focused on 11 subject-matter-expert interviews working in the field of crisis communications, which offered a level of exclusive expertise to support strategies for companies dealing with an issue.

The results demonstrate that there are best practices organizations should strategically implement before, during and after a crisis to successfully manage an issue on social media. If followed, these best practices can reduce reputational risk for an organization going through a crisis situation. As represented in the results, there appear to be nine major themes present across all of the interviews. The themes support the hypotheses that state organizations should engage in social media monitoring prior to a crisis, organizations should rely on crisis experts and pre-trained teams during a crisis, and organizations should take into account what type of industry they belong to prior to constructing their crisis strategy plan.

Recommendations based on the study include developing a strategic crisis communications team, expanding training to focus on generational differences, developing global crisis plans, having a targeted approach to a vulnerability scan, and ranking key stakeholders and audiences.

INTRODUCTION

McDonald's, KFC and United Airlines are examples of companies that have experienced a damaging reputational issue on social media. Social media is part of our culture and communications as a society, and it is forcing crisis communications experts to evaluate and challenge preexisting crisis communications counsel. Social media has positive and negative consequences for organizations. A company's presence on social media platforms varies depending on the industry, key audiences and strategic goals.

Research suggests crisis management best practices should be identified and understood to minimize reputational risks on social media (Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley, 2013). Crisis communications industry experts identify the need for continued research in crisis management on social media, as companies are not always confident how to successfully manage an issue stemming from social media platforms.

Before discussing how companies can better manage social media issues, it is important to define the current social media landscape, beginning with online firestorms. An online firestorm is a "negative word-of-mouth complaint and behavior against a person, company or group" that has the potential to spread quickly, subsequently leading to a crisis or online issue (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Experts suggest that social media is not used to its full potential when identifying or responding to a crisis situation (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, Lachlan, 2016). Right now, recommendations on how to use social media in a crisis scenario are largely unstructured and untested, yet there is a strong need to apply social media best practices to risk and crisis management (Lin et al., 2016).

One of the first places to start evaluating crisis management and social media is the current landscape. Social media continues to grow in popularity at a profound rate. On a total population basis, accounting for Americans who do not use the internet at all, 68 percent of all U.S. adults are Facebook users (Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan, 2016). The number of social media users around the world has grown over the past few years allowing for large quantities of information to spread (Pfeffer et al., 2013).

The concept of consumers and stakeholders vocalizing criticism and complaints about a company's products and actions through online channels is nothing new (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Yet the speed at which negative information can spread through social media comes as a shock to organizations. The speed of social media has recently reached new levels (Pfeffer et al., 2013), and in an online crisis a person, company or group can be intensely criticized without pointing to an actual specific criticism (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Within hours, negative opinions about a company can be formed and shared by thousands, even millions of people. This concept is similar to how rumors spread. While rumors are unconfirmed, "online firestorms can be rumor based (unconfirmed) or event based" (Pfeffer et al., 2013). It doesn't always matter whether or not the rumor is factual; in the public's mind, perception is reality.

It remains to be understood how organizations should control a crisis situation through social media, keeping in mind the speed factor, in order to minimize reputational damage to the company. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to understand a crisis situation, determine if there are best practices companies can use to control a narrative before, during and after a crisis on social media in order to minimize reputational risk, and provide best-practice recommendations. Do companies feel they have all the necessary tools in place to manage a crisis on social media? Do executive leadership teams understand the speed of social

media? Are the teams prepared? What best practices can be implemented to make sure a crisis doesn't become worse as a result of an online issue? This study will also examine the current social media landscape. Subject-matter-expert interviews were conducted to further understand the current crisis management industry and its practical applications in the workplace today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Crisis, Social Media and its Audiences

The crisis countdown clock is ticking. A healthcare product has threatened the health and wellbeing of thousands of people. The product is temporarily pulled off the market, and negative comments about the company are spreading quickly on social media. The news media has picked up the story, and widespread coverage has begun on local and national media outlets. Consumers are commenting about the risks this healthcare product has on families and children. A crisis for this company has begun. How should this company handle the crisis? How quickly do they need to react and respond?

A crisis is defined as a "significant business disruption, which could stimulate extensive news media coverage. The resulting public scrutiny will affect the organization's normal business operations and could also have a political, legal, financial and government impact on business" (Jordan-Meier, 2011). To expand on that definition, a crisis is also defined as "unpredictable, and is even characterized as chaotic events that require deliberate and immediate responses" (Lin et al., 2016). Research says the "difficulties involved with communicating in a crisis become more obvious because the public has the ability to have an immediate and sometimes exaggerated role in the conversation" (Lin et al., 2016). Just like the aforementioned healthcare company experienced, a crisis can result in the downfall of corporate reputation (Xu and Wu, 2017). Every next step, as the

healthcare company will soon realize, needs to be precisely calculated and strategically implemented.

The healthcare company is dealing with a “smoldering crisis,” which is the most common crisis. It starts out to be a small issue but grows over time to become a crisis (Smith, 2002). Three-fourths of all crises begin as smoldering issues (Jordan-Meier, 2011). Over the years, research consistently predicts four types of crisis situations: 1) smoldering; 2) sudden; 3) bizarre; and 4) perceptual (Smith, 2002). An organization’s leadership can extensively prepare for a sudden crisis, which includes incidents such as fires, explosions and natural disasters. A bizarre crisis is difficult to prepare for and may include a major accident or unexpected death (Smith, 2002). A perceptual crisis is based on public perception. An example would be “a small college fighting the perception that because they are small they cannot offer a good education” (Smith, 2002).

Whether it’s a sudden or smoldering crisis, the timing of a crisis is unpredictable and requires deliberate and immediate response (Lin et al., 2016). As a result, the role of social media should not be underestimated in today’s world. Social media at its core is human communication, possessing “characteristics of participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness” and can help or harm organizations (Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar, 2011). Social media allows individuals to become sources of information online by sharing opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with others. Americans use social media to connect with one another, engage with news content, share information and seek entertainment (Greenwood et al., 2016).

Nearly 8 in 10 *online* Americans (79 percent) now use Facebook, more than double the share that uses Twitter (24 percent), Pinterest (31 percent), Instagram (32 percent) or LinkedIn (29 percent) (Greenwood et al., 2016). The Pew

Research Center began tracking social media users in 2005, and found that just 5 percent of American adults used social media. By 2011, that number increased to half of all Americans. Today, it's fair to say the majority of the public uses some type of social media (Greenwood et al., 2016).

Given the pervasiveness of social media, it is imperative to understand how consumers react to news when negative information about a company spreads online. The Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC) suggests three types of groups that interact with an organization during a crisis on social media (Zhu, L., et al., 2017). These include:

1. Influential social media creators who create crisis information. This is a group that amplifies the crisis or ignites the issue. It's a group of people companies should monitor closely and may contain key influencers.
2. Social media followers who consume the influential social media creators' crisis information. These are daily consumers who read and watch the crisis unfold on social media. They engage by commenting or reposting the issue.
3. Social media in-actives who consume influential social media creators' crisis information indirectly through offline word-of-mouth communication and/or traditional media. This group may not be on social media platforms, but hears about the issue and learns about the crisis through verbal conversations or traditional media channels such as a newspaper or broadcast television show (Zhu, L., et al., 2017).

While there are studies linking social media and crisis management, there are few academic studies that have examined the relationship between crisis management and social media as a channel to manage as a crisis spreads quickly online. Organizations may understand "huge waves of outrage" spreading within a few hours, but the planning and execution stage is lacking. Companies are not

preparing for a crisis social media response as they would other highly trafficked communications channels (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Why are organizations not successfully preparing for a crisis issue on social media? It may be the lack of knowledge in mid-level and junior-level staffers within an organization. Others blame the lack of social media crisis preparation on the speed factor. On the other hand, understanding how to repair a corporate image is lacking among organizations. This study seeks to fill this void by offering comprehensive best practices that can be followed before, during, and after any crisis situation on social media.

Managing a Crisis on Social Media: What's Lacking?

To continue the discussion about why organizations are not successfully preparing for a crisis on social media, it's important to dive into the structural gaps within an organization. In a study from 2011, researchers found similarities among various internal teams that were collectively unsuccessful in managing reputational risk. This research talked about how the majority of businesses caught up in a social media crisis lacked proper internal education programs, professional staff, triage systems and employee social media policies. These were key problem areas for companies (Swallow, 2011). When companies have poor influencer relations and broken internal ethical guidelines, it's even harder to manage a crisis issue (Swallow, 2011).

One expert opinion suggests companies that experience a social media crisis lack the following internal requirements (Swallow, 2011):

- Internal education about crisis preparedness
- Professional staff that are willing and able to deal with a crisis
- Triage plan to alert the right team members at the right time
- Employee policy to alert employees of what is and is not acceptable

- Influencer identification to understand the top media influencers in the industry

Understanding the Speed of Social Media

Not only do organizations need solid internal policies and procedures, the internal teams need to have an understanding of crisis preparedness. Part of that preparation process understands the speed of social media and how quickly information can disseminate online. Speed and volume are the most obvious factors that drive engagement (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Some researchers suggest the lack of comprehension around speed can result in the downfall of an organization (Pfeffer et al., 2013). When an internet-related event happens, time is measured in hours – not days or weeks. It's in the best interest of the organization to train employees and senior leadership who may not have a full grasp of the social media landscape.

How fast can information spread on social media? What hard and fast facts do senior leadership need to understand? According to *Crisis Management at the Speed of the Internet*, “Companies simply cannot wait to get their bureaucratic ducks in a row before addressing the substance and content of negative information online” (Hayes and Kotwica, 2013). To put this into perspective, one expert suggests that in 60 seconds on social media there are 500 hours of video uploaded to YouTube, 448,800 tweets on Twitter, 65,972 photos uploaded to Instagram and 3.3 million posts on Facebook (Allen, 2017).

In the meantime, Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley (2013) suggest there is one social media platform that should be monitored on a regular basis. Twitter stands out as the fastest social media platform. Recent studies show that the half-life of Twitter memes and hashtags, which is the time “after which 50 percent of the overall traffic is reached” (Pfeffer et al., 2013), is minutes or hours. Twitter requires short

and quick communication. Experts suggest Twitter plays a critical role in escalating a crisis on social media because of its reach to mainstream and influencer media (Pfeffer et al., 2013).

Social media encourages word-of-mouth information, which is perceived as more credible in some cases than mainstream media (Veil et al., 2011). To challenge this idea, if word-of-mouth information is at times more credible than mainstream media, it's guaranteed that traditional media (newspapers, TV outlets, online blogs) will gravitate to Twitter for information, which in turn will influence the daily news cycle. If organizations are not monitoring and influencing the company's brand and reputation on these platforms they're simply saying, "It's OK. We're going to outsource our reputation, and we're comfortable with our customers defining it for us," (Veil et al., 2011). Let's hope this is not the mindset companies want to portray. It's how customers perceive the company that will have a lasting impact on an organization's reputation.

To take this idea one step further, customers are consumers who likely engage in some form of news coverage. It's a cycle where negative word-of-mouth information about a company can spread on social media, which in turn is monitored and picked up by mainstream media. As a result, negative information about a company can be broadcast through traditional outlets. Experts found that 92 percent of communication practitioners believe that blogs and social media now influence mainstream news coverage (Veil et al., 2011). This shows that negative word-of-mouth information spread on social media, whether fact or not, gains the attention of traditional media outlets and could have a negative long-term impact on an organization's reputation. Social media is defining the news cycle, which means companies need to be closely monitoring the conversation.

Understanding the Public's Opinion

While current studies accurately outline the breadth and depth of social media platforms, including their power in crisis situations, organizations seem to fail to address the court of public opinion, and how key audiences and stakeholders view the crisis scenario as it plays out on social media. The court of public opinion is defined as “the beliefs and judgment of most people” (Merriam Webster, 2017). In particular, this study examines the Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC) and its viewpoint on the key factors that affect how the public consumes crisis information via social media compared to other sources. The SMCC model was developed by researchers as a framework to deal with an always-changing media landscape. It includes best practices and strategy framework.

Searching For Groups With Similar Opinions Engrains a Viewpoint

Meeting other people face-to-face who have the same opinion stabilizes a person in his opinion. This could be a positive opinion. However, negative feedback destabilizes a person's opinion (Pfeffer et al., 2013). In a crisis situation, it's likely a negative opinion. This researcher says if we analyze the case of similar opinions on social media we find a different process. Social media spreads information quickly and gives off the impression that the vast majority of other people already have the same opinion (Pfeffer et al., 2013). As a result, the implications of the adoption process are dramatic and work swiftly shaping a narrative, whether true or not, on social media (Pfeffer et al., 2013).

According to the SMCC model outlined above, there is a clear connection between a company's public reputation on social media and how consumers evaluate information during a crisis. At the same time, social media is used as a platform to express emotions about various topics. The SMCC model analyzed information

coming from a third-party source, or an organization, and determined what impact it had on the public's acceptance of crisis response (Jin et al., 2011).

Researchers found that the public uses social media to seek out others to provide emotional support during crises. Social platforms are used for emotional venting (Jin et al., 2011). There are two types of emotions consumers feel during a crisis: attribution-independent emotions and attribution-dependent emotions (Jin et al., 2011).

Examples of attribution-independent emotions include fear, anxiety and apprehension. The public feels these emotions when the crisis origin is within an organization (Jin et al., 2011). The public views an internal crisis, or a crisis that starts from within an organization, as the sole responsibility of that organization and its people.

Attribution-dependent emotions include anger, contempt and disgust but, according to researchers, when the public perceives "the crisis origin as external, they are more likely to accept an organization's defensive response," (Jin et al., 2011). This approach assumes the organization has low-perceived responsibility for the crisis such as a natural disaster. The anger, contempt and disgust emotions are intensified or aggravated when the crisis starts from within the organization (Jin et al., 2011).

In one study, experts examined a social media crisis in China. KFC dealt with a food safety issue in China and it exploded on social media (Zhu, L., et al., 2017). It was handled poorly by the organization. What started as an internal crisis quickly became an external issue. Chinese media reported that one of KFC's poultry providers raised chickens to mature in as short as 45 days (Zhu, L., et al., 2017). KFC released a statement attacking its accusers and the poultry providers. KFC denied any part in the wrongdoing and did not apologize for the situation.

It took KFC over a year to recover from the situation (Zhu, L., et al., 2017). KFC took weeks to respond and lost the trust of its key stakeholders in the market. Consumers expressed emotions of anger and disgust on social media (Zhu, L., et al., 2017), yet the organization didn't listen and respond accordingly. What started as an internal crisis with a vendor exploded into emotions of anger, contempt and disgust with external audiences (Zhu, L., et al., 2017).

Repairing Damage to a Company's Reputation

The situation with KFC led to strong emotions from customers that quickly spread on social media. In KFC's case, when they understood consumer anger, contempt and disgust towards the company and the situation, it was important that they strategically think through next steps and figure out how to repair the reputational damage.

Researchers suggest it won't matter what the social media crisis is if corporate organizations don't understand how to repair an image at its core. The Image Restoration Theory (Benoit, 1997) is designed to help practitioners critically evaluate messages during a crisis and determine the best message for its audiences (Benoit, 1997). Fundamentally, the messages should be consistent among all channels, which include social media.

Experts suggest the key to understanding how to communicate in a crisis (which holds true for social media) is to understand five image-repair strategies when evaluating the nature of attacks or complaints that would prompt response in a crisis (Benoit, 1997). The Theory of Image Restoration suggests, "perceptions are more important than realities" (Benoit, 1997), and there are five identified strategies to help organizations maintain a positive reputation during and after a crisis.

1. The first strategy is denial. It can be argued shifting the blame could be an effective strategy (Benoit, 1997).
2. The second is evasion of responsibility, which can be characterized as a reasonable reaction to an external issue. This can be applied under four situations, which are objection, provocation, accidental and good intentions (Benoit, 1997).
3. The next strategy is reducing offensiveness, which is when companies accused of wrongful actions try to reduce the perceived offensiveness of the actions (Benoit, 1997).
4. The fourth strategy is corrective actions, which the company publicly promises to correct the problem.
5. Finally, the fifth strategy is to take responsibility by confessing and asking for forgiveness. Experts suggest this is the mortification strategy (Benoit, 1997).

While this theory suggests options companies can use to maintain a positive reputation during and after a crisis, it fails to explain how and under what circumstances these strategies should be implemented. However, the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) suggests that by identifying the type of crisis, organizations can determine how much crisis responsibility stakeholders will attribute to the organization during the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Not all of these strategies will be used during a crisis, as it depends on the reputational threat and negative impact. Organizations need to accept greater levels of responsibility as the reputational threat increases during a crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Embrace Social Media Tools to Understand Organizational Risk

Once companies have a strategy and core messaging in place, scholars suggest communicators embrace social media tools to better manage a crisis (Veil et al., 2011). While experts suggest embracing social media before an issue starts, there

is minimal research on exactly what best practices should be in place. This is a gap in research, and as such, the number of potential crisis issues has increased exponentially (Swallow, 2011). Social media crises are on the rise. According to Mashable and a recent Altimeter Group study, 76 percent of those that occurred since 2001 could have been averted with a proper plan and social media investment (Swallow, 2011).

One study suggests incorporating social media tools into daily job duties as a scanning best practice to monitor risk and listen to concerns that may stem from an issue (Veil et al., 2011). Monitoring can increase the potential the crisis is addressed sooner (Veil et al., 2011). On the other hand, monitoring may not be enough. Good crisis communicators engage with social platforms before an issue arises (Veil et al., 2011). Practitioners encourage organizations to respond to positive social media posts, before an issue begins, demonstrating that the company cares what its stakeholders think and can be trusted to address concerns in the future.

Crisis Messaging Through Social Media's Clutter

Social media advocates can get information in a variety of ways, and this study focuses on the stages of a crisis and how communicators and organizations can best navigate messaging through the online clutter.

First, to navigate the clutter when dealing with an online issue, if it's good counsel to respond at all, respond using the search terms, hashtags and same social media platform as the original post. This will increase the chance that the organization's response will populate alongside the original content in Google or other search engines (Hayes and Kotwica, 2013).

Researchers suggest four stages of a crisis, with stage two fueled by the speed and reach of social media (Jordan-Meier, 2011). The first stage is the “*Fact Finding*” stage where basic facts are made know, confirmed and reported. Stage two is the “*Unfolding Drama*” stage where key players, such as companies or individuals, emerge in the center of a crisis (Jordan-Meier, 2011). This is where a crisis issue can go viral on social media. Stage three is the “*Finger Pointing*” stage where those involved or the media attempt to assign blame to anyone who could be perceived as responsible for the crisis. This can be a hazardous stage for organizations if not handled correctly, escalating the situation and making it worse (Jordan-Meier, 2011). Stage four is the “*Resolution and Fallout*” stage, which is nearing the end of the crisis cycle (Jordan-Meier, 2011).

To counter the research, no matter what happens to the organization’s reputation, positively or negatively, the stages of a crisis reflected above won’t matter without a core fan base of influencers (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Companies need to be proactive and create fan networks long before the crisis storm begins. Organizations will rely on a network of influencers during difficult times.

This study examines crisis management on social media. Prior research reveals a lack of research-based connection between crisis response and social media, keeping in mind social media as a key channel in communication efforts. To examine effective and clearly defined strategies for companies to manage a reputational issue on social media, this study asks: What are the current best practices in leveraging social media for crisis response?

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The primary research surrounding the topic of crisis management and social media response included in-person, phone and email interviews with 11 subject-matter experts. Interviews were conducted April 30-June 16, 2017. Experts in the field of crisis communications have insights into the current crisis landscape, and offer a level of exclusive expertise to support strategies for companies dealing with an issue. Tools and recommendations can be developed as a guide on how companies should or should not use social media as part of a larger comprehensive crisis management strategy.

The interviews were recorded over the phone or in-person. A comprehensive transcript can be found in the appendix of this study. The participants agreed to be recorded and were given the questions prior to the interview to review. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to over one hour.

An expert was defined as an industry professional that has worked at least five years in the field of crisis management and/or has been responsible for managing crisis-related work in his/her job within the last two years. The interviewees were chosen through personal networks, crisis team-member contacts and committee member recommendations. The participants agreed to have their names released for the purpose of this study.

The crisis management professionals interviewed included:

- **Rob Clark**, Vice President of Global Corporate Communications for Medtronic, Inc.

- **Greg Zimprich**, Director of Global Business Communications at Honeywell
- **Amy von Walter**, Executive Vice President of Communications and Customer Care at Toys “R” Us
- **Gerard Braud**, CEO of Braud Communications
- **Matthew Furman**, Chief Communications and Public Affairs Officer for Best Buy Corporate
- **Bob McNaney**, Senior Vice President of Crisis and Reputation Management at Padilla
- **Brian Ellis**, Executive Vice President of Crisis and Reputation Management at Padilla
- **Dexter Davis**, Director, Enterprise Procurement at Securian Financial Group
- **Curtis Smith**, Director of Marketing at The Nerderly
- **Chris Wright**, President of the Minnesota Timberwolves
- **Bill Coletti**, CEO of Kith Corporation, Former Executive Vice President and Global Co-Lead of Crisis and Issues Management at Hill + Knowlton

An email example used to recruit the subject matter expert interviewees is included as Appendix 1. The complete list of questions asked during the interviews is included as Appendix 2. The full transcript of the interviews is included as Appendix 3.

Expected Outcomes from Subject Matter Expert Interviews

Given conclusions from previous research and considering the backgrounds of the subjects in the interviews, I hypothesized that my study would produce the following three conclusions:

- Organizations should engage in social media monitoring prior to a crisis

- Organizations should rely on crisis experts and pre-trained teams during a crisis
- Organizations should take into account what type of industry they belong to (e.g., industry is defined as business-to-business and business-to-consumer facing industries) prior to constructing their social media crisis strategy plan (i.e., crises differ depending on industry)

RESULTS

A set of common themes and best practices emerged from the 11 crisis expert interviews surrounding how to successfully manage the before, during and after a crisis situation on social media. The results within each of these three frameworks are described below:

Before a Crisis:

All of the interviewees reported that social media is a powerful and fast communication channel. They all mentioned that it should not be ignored by organizations, rather treated as a communication outlet that needs to be understood, monitored and strategically utilized during a crisis. As one of the experts put it, “Social media requires us to have thick skin, as does every crisis issue. But, that’s definitely the case on social media.”

All of the experts identified the importance of a crisis communication plan, which includes statements and language to use when a crisis occurs. Social media is part of the crisis communications plan. Bob McNaney, senior vice president of crisis and reputation management at Padilla, says “It’s important to understand that social media is one aspect of the crisis management plan. In short, don’t be afraid of it. Plan for it just as you would a natural disaster, workplace violence incident or a major recall.” Scenarios that have the greatest risk and likelihood to

occur for an organization are identified in a crisis plan, followed by template messaging. Gerard Braud, CEO of Braud Communications, says, “Fight over the benign words and messaging on a clear and sunny day. Every one of those pre-planned documents can be proofed by a lawyer or an executive on a clear and sunny day, so that when you need to use them, you already know what the language is.” This also holds true for statements that will be released on social media.

In addition to having pre-approved messaging and statements, at least two of the experts identified the importance of administrative details in a crisis plan. This is a list of phone numbers, emails, and general contact information in order to contact the right people within an organization quickly and efficiently. Amy von Walter, executive vice president of communications and customer care at Toys “R” Us, says this may be one of the most critical components in a plan that if not planned could slow down an organization’s response in a crisis. Walter says, “I’m always surprised by the number of times when something like that really catches people off guard, and you know, you’re out on a Saturday night and need to call someone, but you realize you don’t have their phone number. These are things that can really tie you up in a crisis, so those administrative details are really important to have documented in advance.”

Additionally, all of the experts suggest social media monitoring in advance of a crisis. This point was an expected outcome of this study and was upheld in each expert interview. This includes identifying key online influencers associated with an organization’s industry. Build relationships with these key influencers before a crisis occurs because an organization may need to call on them for support or neutralize them to manage a social media crisis.

All of the experts agreed that having an excellent staff and team to manage an organizational crisis on social media is critically important. Team identification should be included as part of the crisis planning process before a crisis occurs. The experts agreed there should be cynical people on the crisis team. Braud says, “Too many organizations fail to have cynics on the staff. I’m a fan of having cynics on the staff who will look at everything from a different perspective. I’m obsessed with the downside, because all of the work that you do on a daily basis needs to stay in place. The equity you earn with your customers and the loyalty that you earn with your customers is not something companies want to lose. It’s foolish to have it lost because of a crisis.” Equity and loyalty can be lost if a crisis is not handled properly. Braud suggests it’s the psychology of human denial, or how bad an issue can become during a crisis, that has companies not handling issues properly. To further this point, Matthew Furman, chief communications and public affairs officer at Best Buy, says effective crisis counselors have to be “both calm and urgent. You have to be both thoughtful and an activator. It requires being in the moment and it doesn’t come naturally to most people.” Furman added, “On a practical level crisis experts need to know the business.”

It should not be the CEO level that manages a social media crisis. Amy von Walter from Toys “R” Us says, “My expectation isn’t that the CEO is an expert in social media. It’s my job to have the subject matter expertise, and I would give counsel like I would any other communication vehicle, whether that be print, broadcast or online channels.” To add to this point, Greg Zimprich, director of global business communications at Honeywell Corporate, argues that just because a team member is savvy on social media doesn’t mean they should manage a social media crisis. Zimprich says, “A lot of the issues that I’ve seen through the years are caused because either junior people or untrained people have been given the keys to social media and they’ve made really obvious mistakes and errors in a crisis.” Supporting this point Bill Coletti, CEO of Kith

Corporation, says, “It’s important to understand the chain of command because the saying goes that speed kills, but in a crisis situation, speed saves. The ability to make decisions quickly, and the ability to get messages out to your key stakeholders quickly and efficiently, with as much information as possible, is the main differentiator between those that succeed and those that fail.” Once again, the themes mentioned above tie back to an expected outcome of this study, in this case that senior leaders should rely on crisis experts and ensure that teams are well trained and experienced in crisis social media management.

Moreover, many interviewees suggested that while the chain of command in a crisis needs to be strong and identified early, part of the preparation process in a social media crisis is taking into account generational differences and geographical locations. Not every generation has the same understanding of social media and its capabilities. One expert says that part of the training process to prepare for a crisis on social media is closing any knowledge gaps between Millennials, Baby Boomers and the Gen Xers so that internal and external communications with key stakeholders during a crisis are understood.

Further, one expert advises that global companies need to take into account social media in other countries and those core cultural audiences and generations. Global companies, such as Medtronic, need to monitor markets in India and China. Rob Clark, vice president of global communications at Medtronic Inc., says that WeChat is one of the most popular social media platforms in China and India. He suggests it’s important to understand the generations using this platform, and monitor for Medtronic-related issues specific to Chinese and Indian culture. On the other hand, Coletti suggests that on the global scale, American organizations are behind – compared to other countries – on implementing crisis planning. Coletti says, “American companies lag European companies in their ability to plan for a crisis. Europe is more developed, particularly in simulation (or practice) training.” Coletti goes on to say

that this is because European companies better understand the importance of cross-cultural and global crisis and social media trainings.

During a Crisis:

Nearly every interviewee mentioned that the crisis planning stage is key because it helps organizations have a starting point when a crisis situation occurs. One theme consistent among all the experts is that an organization will never be able to please everyone during a social media crisis. Brian Ellis, executive vice president of crisis and reputation management at Padilla says, “There are some people and audiences that organizations will never make happy no matter what they say or do. There are some people that are professional complainers. Social media is the perfect platform for them. You’re never going to change their opinions. Don’t even bother with them.”

As part of the planning stage for a crisis, Coletti suggests identifying key audiences through the Three C’s idea: customers, community and critics. An organization should have a list of its key customers, community audiences and critics who are important stakeholders and would need to receive information during a crisis. Coletti says, “Chasing social media is a mistake because you can never keep up with it. The best strategy is to get a good durable statement out there and update it periodically, depending on the situation. The statement should get out early and show what you (the organization) stand for, what you believe and what you’re doing about it (the crisis).” All of the experts suggest becoming the source of truth and make sure to update the statement regularly.

When responding to a crisis on social media, a majority of the interviewees say it is not strategic to respond to every post and negative mention online. This may fuel the conversation and make the issue worse. The algorithms on social media allow threads to continue to populate in the public’s social media platforms that in

turn could ignite the issue. Many of the experts interviewed say to take the conversation offline or transition the conversation to a dark site. A dark site is a website or a link on the company's website that talks about the crisis issue and usually includes facts and next steps. Social media can be used to alert the public about the dark site information.

Additionally, nearly all of the experts caution that if an organization feels the need to respond to a crisis issue on social media, it should think about the business aspects when making that decision. Ellis says, "We need to keep driving this back to the business and bottom line. While there may be a long ongoing conversation on social media, if there is no impact to the business, do we really need to participate?" Continuing this point, Clark says, "Just draw the line. Just make your statement (not on social), draw your line and let it go. The other component we find is that things blow over in 24 or 48 hours on social media." The expert interviewees suggest that there is always a fast social media cycle, and that each part of the decision-making process during a crisis is when or when not to respond. Curtis Smith, director of marketing at The Nerdery, says that when responding on social media, "It's important to admit problems and apologize, then discuss how the company is going to do it differently moving forward."

However, when deciding on how to respond in a crisis situation, it varies depending on the industry. In this case, industry is defined as business-to-business industries and business-to-consumer industries. Both will have different social media vulnerabilities during a crisis, and in turn the messaging may need to be different. Clark emphasized this point during the interview saying, "The advantage that Medtronic has in a social media crisis, to some degree, is we're not a household name. We're not a household brand in any market. We're well-known in the medical community, in hospitals, and around the world, but we are

not a consumer brand.” The expert interviewees suggest consumer-facing brands face increased scrutiny online. The audiences that need to be communicated to during a crisis in Medtronic’s case will be different than a consumer-facing organization such as Toys “R” Us.

After a Crisis:

The expert interviewees all mention that the aftermath of a crisis should not be overlooked or lost; there is an emotional and physical healing that will need to take place. Coletti says, “The aftermath of a crisis is an opportunity for planning. Use it as an opportunity to build a foundation for reputational growth after the situation, and then use it as an opportunity to re-catalog and identify those stakeholders that you wished were on your side after the fact.” Smith expands on this saying, “The aftermath of a crisis can get really tough because the organization is going to change depending on the level of the crisis.” Change within an organization in the aftermath of a crisis could be structural or cultural depending on the situation. Part of the mourning for the crisis situation is understanding what actions led up to the crisis. Daily reviews, if it is a major issue, should be conducted with internal and executive leadership teams. McNaney says, “Don’t become an organization that ‘talks the talk’ but doesn’t ‘walk the walk’ after a crisis. Companies talk about making improvements, doing trainings, etc., but few actually do.” Coletti expands on this saying, “Organizations need to be very thoughtful in the aftermath of a crisis because once you’re out of the woods, there are lingering but unsaid implications, and I don’t think you should simply blow those off.”

Summarizing the Themes

The identification of best practices in the before, during and after stages of a crisis situation on social media is extremely important. Each stage has its best practices that should be understood and implemented within organizations. All

three of the identified expected outcomes were upheld, and represent core practices that will strategically support a successful outcome for organizations going through a social media crisis. As represented in my results, there appear to be nine major themes across all of the interviews:

1. Crisis management preparation is crucial, and the social media component included in the plan as a key communication channel should be understood and implemented within organizations. Part of the planning stage is ongoing social media monitoring. Without a plan that employees have been trained on and practiced, companies are disabled when an issue hits.
2. Identification of key social media influencers, relevant to the industry, is critical for success when managing a crisis online.
3. Social media is one more channel to identify during a crisis and it can escalate a crisis from bad to worse.
4. Evaluating the business aspects of the issue are critical when deciding whether to directly respond or not on social media during a crisis.
5. Companies need to understand the decision-making chain of command before a crisis occurs (e.g., companies need to determine who will be in charge of social media platforms before, during and after a crisis; the teams also need to be well trained).
6. Senior leaders rely on crisis experts and specific teams to truly understand the impact social media can have on a company because they haven't experienced it first-hand. Both internal and external counsel is recommended.
7. Generational differences should be taken into account when managing a crisis on social media (e.g., Millennials, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers have a varied understanding of how social media works. Organizations should take into account those differences with internal and external audiences).

8. The messaging of the company experiencing the social media crisis will be influenced by its industry (e.g., industry is defined as business-to-business and business-to-consumer facing industries).
9. Global companies need to take into account social media in other countries, as the messaging, monitoring and tone may be different than if speaking to an American audience.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Why do we, as experts, try to support organizations going through crisis and reputational issues? Why is it important to develop best practices for companies going through a crisis situation? Simply put, people, communities and livelihoods can be at stake. It is our duty as crisis communicators to develop best practices in order for organizations to be the best they can be even on the worst day. If thought about from a personal perspective, when a close friend seeks counsel and support, it is our obligation to help. The same holds true for crisis communicators. It takes a unique set of skills and personality to guide companies through some of the most difficult times. These recommendations on the best practices to navigate a social media crisis issue are to ensure organizations know experts have conducted research and will fight to maintain a positive corporate reputation. The recommendations go above and beyond previous research and offer a new perspective on how to successfully manage a crisis on social media.

Expanding upon the previously discussed themes from my results, my research points to organizations enacting the following recommendations:

Develop a Strategic Crisis Team:

First, in order to understand the recommendations and best practices to manage the narrative in a crisis on social media, it helps to understand who will execute

the counsel to organizations. It is recommended the communications and marketing teams at an organization work together to develop a crisis communications team. This team should be comprised of mid-to-senior level communicators and industry experts, and include a representative from human resources, finance, IT and technology, communications, security and corporate. Depending on the industry, this team and its job titles will change. The crisis communications team will be called upon when issues arise, and can strategically implement new ideas and counsel to the rest of the company, including senior leadership and key internal and external stakeholders.

It is also recommended at least one of the core members of this team be well versed in both crisis management best practices and social media. A solid understanding of the marriage between crisis and social media is imperative when navigating organizational issues. Just an understanding of social media won't be adequate for this role; a true understanding of crisis management will also be necessary to support an organization going through a reputational issue. This individual will be responsible for understanding the best practices in crisis management and how it ties directly to online conversations. In addition, the crisis communications team should be a mix of internal and external counsel. Engaging external counsel will be important during a crisis or critical issue and may include support from an external crisis public relations agency or expert(s).

Expand Training to Focus on Generational Differences:

Organizations should consider expanding their crisis and social media training programs. As indicated in the research, training is an important element to successfully practicing and understanding how a crisis situation will unfold on social media. A focus of this expanded training program includes discussion between multiple generations in the workplace today. This includes Millennials, Gen Xers and Baby Boomers. Generational differences should be taken into

account as not every generation in today's workplace has the same understanding of how a crisis unfolds on social media. Further, each generation has a unique understanding of how a crisis should be handled on social media. The expanded training program should include a social media simulation exercise (real-time), and discussions around the similarities and differences in external audiences (comprised of different generations) analyzing and receiving crisis information. There should also be a training component to help improve the crisis skills of the younger generations who may have less experience in bridging crisis management and social media. The goal is to protect the reputation of the organizations by tapping into communication strategies and messaging that will successfully impact multiple generations.

Target Vulnerability Scans:

Conducting a vulnerability scan is a way to plan for a crisis situation on social media. The scan identifies the risks and issues facing the organization and has the greatest impact on crisis preparedness. Currently, best practice has communicators determining any and all vulnerabilities that could have a negative impact on the organization. Organizations need to focus less on "anything under the sun" that could go wrong and identify risks in three categories: strategic risks, preventable risks and external risks. A strategic risk is defined as a planned business implication such as company layoffs or product pricing increases. A preventable risk is defined as an issue that the company has zero tolerance for and does not achieve economic value to the enterprise. Finally, external risks are defined as issues that happen outside of the organization's control such as a natural disaster or workplace violence incident. All of these categories will have a social media impact. Part of a vulnerability scan includes how to navigate the issues on social media channels.

This recommendation reinforces the idea that social media is a channel to identify during a crisis and that it can escalate a crisis from bad to worse. To minimize that risk, a vulnerability scan focusing on strategic, preventable and external risks will help organizations better plan social media messaging to use in response.

Global and Country-Specific Crisis Communication Plans:

All of the experts in the primary research of this study agree that a crisis communication plan is necessary to mitigate a crisis. Part of that plan includes social media and best practices for handling an online crisis. Global organizations face the unique challenge of controlling risk on a local, national and international scale. Organizations with an international footprint should consider a separate, targeted crisis communication plan for each country that holds stakeholders, employees and products. The country-specific plan should take into account local culture, tone and people as it may differ from an American audience. In addition, the popular social media platforms vary depending on the country and region. A large component of the plan should be social media specific to the country and its people.

Local teams should conduct social media training exercises specific to that organization and local culture. In addition, the crisis communications team should include a region-specific social media crisis expert with a breadth of experience interacting with key audiences. Each country-specific crisis team may differ depending on the region-specific experts. In addition, key influencers that could have an impact on the reputation of the organization should be identified early, as they are cross-cultural. This recommendation supports the idea that global companies need to take into account social media and key influencers in other countries, which will help mitigate reputational risks.

Key Stakeholders and Audiences Rated in Level of Importance:

Part of the planning stage of a crisis is identifying key audiences and stakeholders. When a crisis is happening it's time to communicate to them. There may be room within an organization to confidentially rate the top stakeholders and audiences by level of importance and influence. There will be a time to communicate to all the important stakeholders, but organizations should think through who are the top three-to-five stakeholders that will need to know about an issue first. If not heard directly from the organization first, these stakeholders may become emotional (feelings of anger, disgust, contempt), influence the story and negatively impact the organization at a faster rate than other audiences. At times, these key stakeholders may gravitate to social media to express their negative opinions, resulting in the crisis situation going from bad to worse.

Communication to these stakeholders should start before a crisis occurs. These are the top internal and external influencers who can negatively impact the perception of the organization resulting in a loss of reputation. Categorizing and rating the list will allow organizations to start communication early to some of its top influencers. This recommendation supports the idea that identifying key social media and non-social media influencers and stakeholders, relevant to the industry, is critical for success when managing a crisis online.

New Organizational Roles and Responsibilities:

Organizations should proactively develop a new position within the crisis communications team. The person in this position should have a thorough understanding of crisis management best practices, how that translates to social media and online conversations, and focus primarily on mitigating reputational risk from a social media perspective. In addition, this individual should have a breadth of experience managing crisis communication issues and social media.

This expert would be responsible for engaging external counsel to support the organization during a crisis on social media. A sample job title may be: Vice President of Crisis and Social Media.

One tactic this job could utilize is fielding an annual public opinion survey to external audiences. The goal of the survey would be developing a true understanding of the public's perception of the organization. The survey would be useful for tracking public opinion on social media while dealing with a crisis issue. This could help prove or disprove the effectiveness of the organization's social media crisis strategy. With support from the crisis communications team, the results and data could be used to update the organization's crisis communication plan, with a focus on social media and external online conversations.

In addition, this job could utilize the sole responsibility of understanding past research, such as the stages of a crisis or the different social media crisis situations as indicated in the literature review. A true depth of crisis management and social media knowledge would be imperative for this role.

Develop a Listen, Think and Answer Strategy:

Finally, organizations should always strive to be the best they can be even on their worst day. The more that organizations consume news and reputational issues among peers and competitors in the marketplace, the greater their knowledge. Organizations may already have best practices in place to handle a crisis situation on social media. However, it is encouraged that communication experts challenge those best practices, and strive to be an even better organization prepared to handle a crisis issue likely to spill onto social media.

Listen to the market and what is being said about the organization. **Think** about the business implications of the company's actions, and how it may or may not

impact the reputation of the organization. **Answer** and have a social media and crisis plan in place to be prepared before, during and after a crisis situation.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

For this study, the researcher sought to interview crisis management experts to discover insights about social media best practices used in a crisis response. The goal is to not open other issues and problems for organizations when an issue escalates on social media. The experts interviewed practice crisis management in their jobs and use their skills to counsel their own or other organizations. This study does not include any interviews with audiences that may have benefitted from crisis management counsel. This would have provided a more complete insight into how the counsel and strategies implemented by the crisis experts have been received. Audience and public reaction offers a new research opportunity to complete this story.

Another topic to research is investigating the relationship between negative conversations about a company on social media, and an organization's revenue and bottom line measurements before, during and after a crisis situation. Is there a relationship between them? Can we demonstrate a connection? There is minimal research here and it would be an excellent addition to further understanding the relationship between crisis management and social media.

Also, additional individuals and relevant sources could be interviewed to expand on the experts' viewpoints. During this research, every effort was made to correctly and accurately transcribe the interviews for future use. Yet information was lost due to technology issues resulting in inaudible moments during the interviews.

Lastly, it's important to note that two of the subject matter experts interviewed work at the same organization as the researcher, thereby potentially limiting their contribution due to bias. Further research could increase the sample size in order to limit the amount of bias in the study.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to understand a crisis situation and employ best practices to explore how companies can best control a narrative on social media during a crisis issue. There is a need for more research on the topic. As outlined in the limitations and further research section, topics could include focusing on audience perceptions during crisis and any connections between negative social media and an organization's bottom line. There are many factors that influence a crisis on social media. However, until now, social media best practices surrounding the before, during and after a crisis situation have not been explored and organized. These results and recommendations go above and beyond previous research on this topic. The recommendations offer new insights companies can use to handle crisis situations, specifically in the area of social media.

In light of this research, it is clear that social media best practices, if organized for before, during and after a crisis situation, will help organizations successfully navigate through a crisis on social media. Social media is a communication channel. As such, these best practices need to be implemented to manage this important channel during a crisis.

In comparing the secondary research to the primary research, there is a strong connection between best practices in previous research and implementation in the workforce today. This connection suggests that research is being used in the practical application of crisis communication strategies today. However, keep in

mind some of the research on this topic is outdated. This supports the need for further research to support real-life applications for crisis communication teams dealing with a social media issue.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: ***Email Example to Recruit Subject Matter Expert Interviews***

Hi Rob,

I hope you're doing well. It was great to meet with you a few months ago. I appreciate your time. Per our conversation, I have a request that I could use your help with surrounding my University of Minnesota graduate capstone project. We discussed the project briefly during our coffee meeting.

I'm graduating from the University of Minnesota with my M.A. in Strategic Communications. I have a final capstone project between now and the end of June and would like to interview you as an expert. I'm working on a research paper and a component of the research is subject matter expert interviews. I want to reach out to set up some time to interview you as a subject matter expert about crisis management and social media response from the corporate perspective.

The subject matter expert interviews will be used to frame my analysis of the current best practices in social media crisis response. As an expert in the industry, I would like to set up an in-person meeting to walk through the questions and your responses.

I will pass along my questions before the meeting for your review.

Is there a day and time that works best for you in the month of May or early June? It would be great to get a time saved in the calendar. If an in-person meeting doesn't work we can chat over the phone or I could send the questions via email.

Let me know your thoughts! I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,

Katie Priebe
[715.571.6428](tel:715.571.6428) (cell)

Appendix 2: ***Subject Matter Expert Interview Questions and Information Sheet***

Description of Subject Matter Expert (SME) Interviews:

The research surrounding my topic about crisis management and social media response will include original research and interviews with subject matter experts in the industry. The research will consist of leveraging the expertise of 10 subject matter experts in the area of crisis management.

The research will include 1:1 interviews (either in-person, over the phone and/or email) with experts in the industry. During the course of my research networking meetings, there will be a series of questions asked which will be logged and recorded for use. The subject matter expert interviews will be used to frame my analysis of the current best practices in social media crisis response.

An expert will be defined as an industry professional that has worked at least five years in the field of crisis management and/or has been responsible for managing crisis related work in his/her job within the last two years. I will choose my experts through my own personal network, crisis team-member contacts, and recommendations from my committee.

Based on my interviews with experts in the field, I will use the data to investigate my research question. The data will identify the best practices currently utilized in the crisis management field when using social media to reactively or proactively respond to a crisis.

Questions Include:

Part 1: Pre-Crisis

- In your opinion, how should companies and organizations *best* plan for a crisis on social media? A crisis on social media would include an online situation that has, or risks having, a harmful effect on your brand's reputation. It will likely involve a dramatic increase in social media traffic through shares and Tweets. A recent example would be the United Airlines video of an employee dragged off the plane by police.
- Based on your experience, what are companies doing well in the area of social media crisis planning?
- Based on your experience, what are a few strategies and tactics that companies and organizations are *not* doing well to prepare for a social media crisis?

Part 2: During the Crisis

- In your opinion, what are a few strategies that you have used when dealing with a crisis? Do you consider these strategies to be best practices? Why?
- Based on the actual crisis situations that you have managed, did you find it more effective to manage the crisis with traditional media or social media influencers? Why? Traditional media influencers would include journalists practicing in traditional platforms such as TV or newspaper outlets. Social media influencers are individuals or groups that solely live on social media and are considered influencers because of their followers and overall audience reach.
- What is the response protocol at your organization when managing a crisis on social media? Do you have a social media policy? Do your employees know and understand the social media policy? How were your employees trained on the policy?
- How well does your senior leadership team understand social media and its platforms? Please explain.
- Which social media platforms tend to have the most impact during a crisis situation? What are the platforms that a communications professional needs to watch closely when monitoring for a crisis situation? Why?
- How quickly do you think an issue about your organization can go viral on social media? Please give an estimated timeframe. Do you feel your company is prepared to handle the speed and volume of a social media crisis? Why or why not?
- In your opinion, what is the most memorable social media crisis your company had to deal with in the last five years? Please explain.

Part 3: Post-Crisis

- In your opinion, what are the best practices that you found to be effective in dealing with the aftermath of a crisis? An aftermath of a crisis would consist of the days and years after the issue has ended, or the issue is not a top priority in the ongoing news cycle. This includes the time it takes to rebuild the brand's reputation and/or stock value. This process may take years for companies and organizations.
- What are a few strategies your company has effectively deployed when managing the aftermath of a crisis? Please explain.
- What were a few strategies that you think could be improved upon in managing the aftermath of a crisis? Please explain.

Is there anything else that you would like to mention regarding the best practices that your company has used when managing a crisis situation on social media?

Thank you for your time.
Katie Priebe

Appendix 3:
Subject Matter Expert Interviews Transcript Log of Conversations

Gerard Braud, CEO of Braud Communications

The interview with Gerard Braud was recorded on Wednesday, May 3, 2017 and lasted about one hour. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Gerard Braud: This is Gerard.

Katie Priebe: Hey, Gerard. It's Katie Priebe calling. How are you?

Gerard Braud: I'm good, Katie. How are you doing today?

Katie Priebe: Good, doing well. Is this still a good time for you?

Gerard Braud: Absolutely.

Katie Priebe: Great. Good. Thanks for offering to help me out with my Capstone. I appreciate it.

Gerard Braud: I'm just happy to see somebody interested in the topic.

Katie Priebe: You're what?

Gerard Braud: I said I'm just thrilled to see somebody interested in the topic of crisis communications.

Katie Priebe: Oh, yeah.

Gerard Braud: For me, doing this for 22 years now, it's like you can't get leadership interested in this stuff, and a lot of PR people don't want to do it. They just want to do the happy-pappy stuff, so I'm thrilled to help you.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, I appreciate it. I know you probably read through the document that I sent over, but essentially what my final project will be a Capstone paper. Then part of the research will be the subject matter expert interviews like we're doing, so I'll be interviewing 10 people throughout the course of the next month and a half or so.

Gerard Braud: Cool.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, it's really interesting. It's obviously what you specialize in and then an interest of mine to really just dive deep into this topic.

Gerard Braud: It's going to be interesting to see who else you interview and everybody's perspective on it.

Katie Priebe: Sure. Yeah, definitely, and if you have any ideas on other interviews, that would be great. Do let me know. Right now I have some people from corporate in the Twin Cities area. One person at Honeywell, Medtronic, that I'll be interviewing, some agency experts as well, but if there's anyone that comes to mind that would be good to talk to just in your network.

Gerard Braud: Write down this name. You ready?

Katie Priebe: I'm sorry, what?

Gerard Braud: Here's a name and a number for you.

Katie Priebe: Oh, sure.

Gerard Braud: Call Bill Coletti, C-O-L-E-T-T-I, and he's at 407-739-1843. That's 407-739-1843. Bill lives in Austin, Texas. He has a company called Kith Consulting, K-I-T-H. It's one of those names that means something to the people who started the firm, but hell if I know what it means. It's not his name or anything, but he was head of Crisis Communications at Hill+Knowlton for a long time. I've just met him in passing over the years, seems to be a really smart guy who knows what he's talking about.

Katie Priebe: Sure. That's great. Okay, good. That's helpful. I appreciate it.

Gerard Braud: Sure.

Katie Priebe: If you're okay, part of the paper that they've asked us to do is to record our interview.

Gerard Braud: I was going to suggest, record it, yes.

Katie Priebe: If you're okay with that, I just want to let you know I'll record it.

Gerard Braud: Absolutely.

Katie Priebe: Then what I'll do is put together a transcript that will go on the back end of my paper, just to show that we talked about the subject and everything.

Gerard Braud: Yeah, happy to do it.

Katie Priebe: Great. Good, so I'm sure you saw on my expert interview questions, I bucketed this into three areas: talking about pre-crisis, during the crisis, and then post-crisis.

Gerard Braud: Right.

Katie Priebe: I would like to get your thoughts, too, of where you want to start or if we should just go bucket our questions and our topic that way.

Gerard Braud: Yeah, you've got a logical sequence here, so just go through them and ask whatever question and follow-up question you need based on my answer, and make sure you ask me for clarification if there's something that I say that doesn't quite resonate. Just ask follow-ups. We've got time for you here.

Katie Priebe: Sure. Okay, perfect. That sounds great. The first question is just talking about how companies and organizations should best plan for a crisis on social media. I think just the research that I've done so far, obviously, we want to plan, and we want to have some sort of a crisis communication plan, but I'd love to get your thoughts on what's the best practice and the best way to plan for specifically a crisis on social media, and is that something you think companies should be doing.

Gerard Braud: All right, so planning for me is the key. The bulk of the work I do is planning and not response. My best case studies are of crises that did not reach a flashpoint in the public eye because we had a plan. We executed the plan, and we managed the crisis so it didn't happen. It's got to be critical that you do it. A crisis communications plan, the kind that I write, I think I've come up with something unique in the way I write a plan in that it's a universal plan for gathering information, confirming information, and then disseminating the information.

So many people in public relations and in business say, "Well, you don't know what the crisis is going to be. You can't plan for everything," and I say bullshit to that because the fact is, it doesn't matter what the crisis is. If your job is communicating, the process is like shampooing your hair. It's rinse, lather, repeat. It's gather information, confirm information, disseminate information. Social media, as a crisis, is partly like every other crisis. It could happen.

The bizarre thing about social media is it forces people to communicate faster than ever before, so the need for speed must

be there. The other unique thing about social media, item number two, is social media could be the source of the crisis, meaning something that you posted or the company posted, that an individual posted. The United Airlines type thing is a perfect example. They would actually fall into category number three. Category number two would be when the company actually does a post that goes bad, that creates bad will because of what was said, what was posted, the video, the image, that type of what I will call brand judgment.

Then the third portion of social media that makes it weird is it amplifies another crisis. With the United thing, the crisis was a guy getting pulled off a plane. The amplification came from the social media and the video side of it, so it forces speed. It could be the source of the crisis, or if the crisis has an ignition point somewhere else or a flashpoint somewhere else, it's the amplification tool.

Either way, I don't believe that you can manage a crisis in most cases only on social media because there are too many trolls and too many individuals who just want to weigh in with an opinion. You're guaranteed not to be able to appease all of these people. Too many organizations, in my opinion, keep trying to manage the crisis on social media. One of the things I was talking about in the workshop when we were in New York is take the conversation offline, or take it to your website.

In my world, if we've planned ... I've got seven news releases sitting here in front of me on my computer right now that I'm working on for a client for social media crises, so that if an event happened on social media, or if social media amplified a crisis, within seconds, minutes, however long it takes to copy edit these documents that I have that have a certain number of fill-in-the-blank questions, a certain number of multiple choice options, and a certain number of benign statements that are true today and will be true tomorrow, they can clean this document up and have it on their website in 10 minutes.

They can email it to reporters. They can put a post on Twitter with a link back to their website. They can put a post on Facebook with a link to their website. They can read it to the media if they need to have a news conference. They can read it as a YouTube script, so the planning side has got to be there.

Katie Priebe:

No, that makes sense. Yeah, I agree. Interesting point, too, what you said about posting, like if you do decide to respond as a company on Twitter or Facebook or YouTube, it's a link back to

the website, right? What are your thoughts on putting a statement actually on Twitter or on Facebook?

Gerard Braud: Give me just a second. My assistant is trying to call in. Let me just send her a text. When I post something on Twitter or Facebook, I want the language to be as boring and benign as possible, so therefore the language might say something that, "Update on corporate communications," hyperlink and send us there. I'm not going to say, "Update on passenger hauled off of plane." I'm not going to repeat the negative. Much like when I'm teaching a media training class, I teach people not to repeat the negative.

On social media, I'm going to do all I can so that those who go to social media intentionally looking for it can be smart enough to find it, but those who are just trolling a newsfeed are going to be bored by it and scroll past it. I don't want to invite in looky-loos. I want to be able to identify my target audience, so if it's an issue that I need reporters to see, then I need somebody on staff who is direct messaging or direct Tweeting to the reporters inside my list of media contacts, but I'm also going to hit them in a barrage of mass emails, as well.

Katie Priebe: Okay. No, I agree. That makes sense. In your experience with your clients, what do you think that ... Maybe not your clients, just in general your experience, what are companies doing well in the area of social media crisis planning?

Gerard Braud: I haven't seen anybody do it right yet. I think too many people are operating off of flawed assumptions. I was the original voice when everybody else was teaching classes on how to use social media for marketing. I was the first one who went, "Oh. This is going to turn out to be really bad for everybody." The clients that I've worked with, who have had crises ... I'll give you an example so that it's tangible.

I work with a lot of small electric companies. They're called rural electric cooperatives, so they're out in rural counties, away from cities. The cities are controlled by investor-owned utilities, and out in the country there are rural electric cooperatives. For any electric company, if the rates go up, it's not uncommon for everybody to go to their Facebook page and bitch. People who want to reach an electric company and bitch at them can do it, I think, most effectively through Facebook because when the power goes out, the first place people go to find out why the power is out is on their cell phone on their Facebook page to try to get information. A lot of people who are very angry at their electric company will start a

Facebook group where they bitch to one another and complain to one another about the price of electricity.

Many companies, I have observed, will wrongly try to engage everybody on Facebook, one at a time. That tends to be conventional wisdom, and I disagree with that because each time you put a comment, whether it's a reply to a question or a thank you for somebody who supported you, you push it to the top of the social media feed. Certainly on Facebook, the algorithm pushes it to the top of the feed. If your grandmother clicks Like on a high school picture of yours from five years ago, suddenly everybody sees you with braces and curly hair instead of the way you look now, right?

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Gerard Braud: There is the embarrassment from grandma clicking on something that's five years old. How did she find that? She had insomnia at 2:00 in the morning. Now you're at the top of the feed, and everybody is commenting on a five-year-old photo. In much the same way, it's a mistake, in my opinion, to directly comment to everybody and to every post because you just keep putting it at the top of the newsfeed. You keep reminding everyone of the negative, and you create the opportunity for many more trolls and many more negatives to pile on.

My approach is certainly when you can identify the customer, you take the conversation offline. Those angry customers are all in your database. You know their address. You know their phone number. You might know their email address, and if don't, you need to have it in a database. You reach out with a phone call, and you say, "Hey, Molly. I saw you had a problem with your electric bill. What can we do to help?" If it originates on social media, it doesn't mean that you solve it on social media. For me, social media needs to be more of a listening post than a place to talk.

Katie Priebe: Just taking notes here. Yeah, that makes sense. Do you think there's ever a time where you would respond to a social media post, or in almost 99% of the cases this is what the recommendation would be that you've seen?

Gerard Braud: That's what I generally recommend. A lot of people disagree. A lot of people think, "Oh, we have to be transparent. We've got to reply." No. If it's 2:00 in the morning, and I'm drunk Facebooking, and I go, "I hate my electric company. I wish y'all would all blow up and die," do I remember I wrote that? No, not really. If I'm just

scrolling through my Facebook page between classes if I'm a college student, and I go, "I hate you guys," do I really expect a reply? Do I even remember that I made the post, out of the 20 posts that I did over a five minute period?

Therefore, the thing that so many people in corporations and organizations do wrong is they take it personally. You know, there's an old saying, "Don't take it personally. It's just business." Hate is a part of having customers. A certain percentage of customers are going to hate you. Change your behavior to make them love you more over time and build equity. Southwest Airlines came out and said, "We're never going to overbook flights ever again." I loved Southwest to begin with. I love them more. Meanwhile, I hate American Airlines. American says, "We're going to take two inches off of every seat," in their announcement today. "Are you freaking kidding me? You were just before Congress yesterday or the day before."

Katie Priebe: I know. I saw that.

Gerard Braud: "Were you not paying attention that everybody is mad collectively at airlines, and now you're saying this statement so we can zoom in on you?" Customers get angry, and you can't be happy for the positive and sad for the negative and think that you're going to win people over in social media. It's not a place to have a decent conversation. It's only a place to make a fight worse. I'll give you the case study that really sealed the deal for me was Chobani.

Chobani Yogurt had mold in the yogurt. I think we used this as a case study in New York. I went out to help them write their crisis communications plan specifically for a food problem, and they never implemented their plan. They could have used their plan, even though they didn't have blessings from the CEO to use it because everything they needed to do was in the plan, including all the pre-written news releases. The corporation waited too late to start a recall. They tried to do the right thing by offering people coupons. "If you open your yogurt and you find mold in it, take it back to the store, and here's some coupons. Let us know. Report it to us, and we'll give you coupons and make it all good."

The customer service lines were tied up. People weren't getting their coupons. A whole lot of the stuff that they were trying to do just didn't go well. There were two people right out of college who were their social media team. I think too many corporations think that just because a person is young that they understand social media. Now, they may be good at social media. The question is, can they manage a crisis on social media because that then takes

veteran scars of understanding how a crisis cascades, to manage the crisis on social media. What they did is these two gals responded, virtually to every post on their Facebook page. Whether it was good or bad, they engaged with that person. That's conventional wisdom among corporations.

What they did is they said, "Thank you, Molly, for supporting us." Twenty to 200 to 500 to 2,000 trolls would jump on and say vile things about them. They simply kept pushing their ugly story to the top of the newsfeed and keeping their crisis top of mind for everybody on Facebook. What was such a shame is that brand, I think, was one of the first really brands that grew organically because of social media. They benefited from yogurt lovers in upstate New York saying, "Hey. Have you guys tried this new yogurt? It's so thick and creamy. It's like the Greek yogurt from Europe. It's not like Yoplait or all the other watery stuff." Right?

Katie Priebe: Sure.

Gerard Braud: Their brand grew so much because of the loyalty of their customers, and yet then they go and get burned by how they managed their social media. Managing social media on a good day is far different than managing social media on a bad day. On a good day, you absolutely want to engage with the positive comments because it does push it to the top of the newsfeed, so other people will see. "Oh, yes. Sally loved this. John loved this. Let's thank them and push it to the top of the newsfeed," but man, if they're cursing you out and hating you, let it die.

You still need to push a statement out but that statement can live on your website, if you want to be transparent and plausible and say, "We did put out a statement." I'm going to say that a smart person knows to go to your website if they truly want to know. If they really care, let them go to your official website.

Katie Priebe: With Chobani and just those kind of situations, what's your recommendation for pre-arranged content, like in a content calendar? When this kind of issue pops up, do you have any thoughts about whether or not you're pushing out coupons or just random promotional materials on social?

Gerard Braud: Right. You have to be ready to pull down the happy, smiley face marketing material when a crisis happens. The University of Texas, Austin, the other day had a guy get killed in a stabbing and two other people injured. First, the University is very slow in putting out information. If you go to their official newsroom for the University, there's a big picture of their mascot in a costume, and

the headline says, "Seven Best Places to Take Your Graduation Photo on Campus." Really? Yes, let's take it by the chalk outline of the dead guy.

Katie Priebe: Right, yeah.

Gerard Braud: I think too many organizations fail to have cynics on staff. I'm a fan of having a cynic on staff who will look at everything you write and everything you post, but they did nothing to put up a crisis statement or take down the happy stuff. Their social media feed, if you went to their Twitter account or their Facebook page, right underneath the warning, "Classes canceled," is all of their happy shit. Click hide. Click delete. Get rid of some of that stuff.

Burger King. I think I showed in our class when Burger King had ... Was it Burger King? McDonald's got hacked.

Katie Priebe: Oh, yeah.

Gerard Braud: McDonald's got hacked, and they had Burger King logos or vice versa. I'm trying to remember. Let me think of this. It was Burger King got hacked. Burger King got hacked, and they make no acknowledgment on their social media feeds, where all of their logos now look like McDonald's. They're still promoting 25 cent coffee. It's as though, as the cynic or as the reporter or as the customer, I just want to shout. "Are you oblivious to your crisis? Are you oblivious as to what's going on around you?"

Katie Priebe: Yeah. I agree, and they are.

Gerard Braud: Yeah. Then they issued a statement that says, "Later today we plan to issue a statement." No. This is the statement. You don't need eight hours to pass before you decide what to say about being hacked. I'm sitting on seven news releases right here, and one of them is, "Social Media Account Hacked." I can have that up on my website in 10 minutes.

Katie Priebe: Oh, definitely. I agree, and that's coming, too, from such a large organization, so you would think that worldwide organization would have some messaging in place, you would hope.

Gerard Braud: Yeah, so I'm constantly frustrated. I've been inside some of these companies, and I know what the problem is. I'm just disturbed after 22 years that the problems that I witnessed 22 years ago, when I started my business, are still the same problems I'm seeing. For that much, they go back to when I started my

journalism career. The whole reason that I shifted from my journalism career to crisis communications is because I saw people making stupid mistakes. I thought, "I can probably fix this. I'll be the evangelist who fixes this." Now I can't make a dent.

Katie Priebe: That's why they call you, though, right? "We don't know what to do."

Gerard Braud: Sometimes they do, and sometimes they don't. That's the other frustrating thing is I see too many people in public relations trained to do what they've seen other people do. What they've been doing for the past 20, 30, 40, 50 years is wrong. It's that old definition of insanity. "Why keep doing the same thing and expecting different results?" That's very much what I see in the public relations profession.

Most of the time if you go to a PRSA conference or an IABC conference, they feature crisis communications sessions with people who had a crisis, who sit on a panel and tell you the lessons they learned through their experience. I sit in the audience thinking every one of these things was predictable and avoidable. Don't sit up there and toss your hair or adjust your glasses and say, "We learned so much." "Screw you. You should have learned so much five years ago, 10 years ago. In college, you should have learned so much because your mistake, your learning so much cost your company 500 million dollars in lost revenue. Good job."

Katie Priebe: Oh, I agree.

Gerard Braud: Can you tell I'm a little frustrated?

Katie Priebe: No, I totally agree. I completely get it. Yeah, it is very frustrating. One thing that we talked about during the New York conference was senior leadership and their understanding of social media. I thought your points were really interesting about that, just how we communicate with senior leadership in order to successfully manage a crisis and have them understand a crisis in social media and the speed of social media. Did you have any thoughts about that?

Gerard Braud: Part of it goes to that age-old question of how do you get a seat at the table. Calling your leaders every time there is an applicable crisis in the news and having a conversation with key people, for me, is the smartest thing an organization can do. The first thing that you do to condition leaders is you say we want to have a vulnerability assessment day. We want you to sit in on it, and we want to talk about all the things that could damage our reputation

and revenue, so the first thing is scare the pants off of people. Get them in a room and quit talking soft skills of reputation management, and start talking about where it hurts them the most which is, "What's our financial loss on this, or what's our potential financial loss?"

United Airlines is making it very easy to track the financial loss. The fact that they had a crisis and last year, their net earning was 2.3 billion, and in 24 hours, they lost 1.4 billion in stock value should be a reason for every communications team to walk in to every executive team and say, "We need to talk about what could affect our stock price," if we're a stock-traded company, or "What would affect our sales," because we haven't gotten a full view of what their ticket sales have been like and how many people over a period of time are choosing to buy a ticket with someone else. The hardest thing for us to do in public relations is to quantify the economic loss. We really need to team with economists to project losses or to investigate losses.

To go back to the core question, do an initial vulnerability assessment. Then after that vulnerability assessment, establish a crisis management group that meets once a week or once a month to talk about other events in our sector or in the world that could affect our organization and do we need to make changes to adjust to it.

If you were an airline, you would all get in a room this week, and you would say, "Well, let's look at all the things that went down with United and American. What should we be doing at airline X, Y, Z to avoid these problems?" If overbooking is the root cause, then you eliminate overbooking. If you're overbooking 14 people, only overbook four. Make some crisis management changes so that you don't have a crisis.

Part of getting senior leadership onboard is having frequent conversations about them. You want them to see your wisdom and to start thinking like you and to understand how you're going to think. You have to indoctrinate people who have never been indoctrinated. This is not something that they focus on when you're getting your MBA.

It's like public relations. We get maybe a couple of chapters in the book on it. In MBA school, maybe they get a chapter on it, but no one ever drills down into it. Nobody ever plans for the worst. They're too busy chasing sales and the uptick to worry about the downside. I'm just obsessed with the downside, because all of the work that you do on a daily basis needs to stay in place. The

equity that you earn with your customers, the loyalty that you earn with your customers, you never want to lose that. It's foolish to have lost it because of a crisis. It's foolish to have lost it because you failed to respond properly or because you waited too long to respond or because you're just plain oblivious.

Katie Priebe: Right. I agree, so what are ways do you think that ... You mentioned just some of the frustrations with-

Gerard Braud: Give me just a second.

Katie Priebe: Oh, yeah. Sure.

Gerard Braud: I'm sorry. I just needed to open a remote gate for the guy. Go ahead. FedEx was delivering something. All right. You were saying?

Katie Priebe: I was just going to ask. You were talking about some of the frustrations with the industry in general and how people are maybe not staying up, staying in tune with the issues and the right strategies to deal with it. What do you recommend, either communications teams or PR professionals or just crisis experts? What do you recommend we do to stay on top of the right response strategies?

Gerard Braud: I think the PR profession needs to take some responsibility for fixing some of this stuff because they just don't drill deep enough on it. They don't fix the stuff. So many people in PR get into it for the happy side of it. Both my daughters were in mass communication, and both of them told me stories of how the professors in the class asked what they all wanted to do upon graduation. I remember my oldest daughter, especially. She's 30 now. Sex and the City was popular back then, and the vast majority of the girls wanted to be like Samantha on Sex and the City, which is event planning. They were in a PR curriculum when they really needed to be in an event planning curriculum.

There are a lot of people who just get into it because they want to do fluffy things. If fluffy is what they want to do, if the shiny stuff is what they want to do, they have no interest in the negative side of things. I watch too many people that I meet at workshops and stuff who ... I'm happy if somebody wants to niche in social media but you can't niche on social media marketing if you also don't recognize the negative side of social media. You can't niche in only the positive and be oblivious to the negative, so I see that many communications people are flat out oblivious to it, and they're not interested in it.

I can judge this by all the conferences where I speak. I remember I was so mad at a conference. I was doing a session on social media when it hits the fan, the negative side of social media. The person in the room was doing search engine optimization. They were overflowing with human beings who wanted to know about search engine optimization, and I had a class of say five. It's tough to get people interested in the negative. It's true for the PR people, and it's true of the executives. The executives aren't going to learn unless the PR people are in there on a weekly basis saying, "Let's discuss this week's vulnerabilities and how it affects the bottom line of the organization."

Every time I speak at a conference where I have leaders and executives, I always see the same little survey. "How many of you are on Facebook? How many of you are on Twitter? How many of you are on LinkedIn? How many are on Instagram? How many are in Pinterest? How many of you have ever done Snapchat? Who's ever put a video on YouTube?" Predictably, some are on Facebook, and fewer are on everything else.

Then I always ask the question, "How many of you have no idea of what I just talked about for the past five minutes?" I get a big laugh, and I have to explain that, "As a leader, you can't make intelligent decisions about the use of these tools if you're not familiar with them. I know you might hate it. I hate it, too, but I'm going to ask you all to go home and get on Facebook for one week and 30 minutes a night for seven days. Just invite Friends and comment on Friends and observe the nature of the conversation because if you haven't observed the nature of the conversation, you don't understand the nuances and the complexities and the need for speed."

Katie Priebe: I agree, for sure. Do you think some leaders may say, "Well, I don't need to get on social media and see how it works because I have a communications team that knows everything, and I trust them, so I'm going to let them deal with it." How do you respond to leaders that may say that?

Gerard Braud: They have no way to know if their communications team is doing the right thing if they don't understand it. The CEO doesn't have to know everybody's job, but they need to be familiar with the critical things, especially the critical things that affect the bottom line of the organization. I don't know if you've ever watched the show Undercover Boss?

Katie Priebe: I have, yeah.

Gerard Braud: It's very clear that some CEOs are not meant to sweep the floor. They don't have the skillset. There are human beings who are brilliant at sweeping the floors in the fast food restaurant and mopping it and cleanliness. That's their vocation and their avocation and their passion. It's always funny because no, the CEO isn't good at those skills, but the CEO at least gets the appreciation of how hard that single mother works to make sure the store is sanitized.

It's that type of stuff that a CEO at least needs to be familiar with. If social media is a critical driver for their organization, for the positive or the negative, they at least owe it to themselves, their stockholders, their customers, their employees to be familiar with how it works. I don't care if they shut down their Facebook page after seven nights. I don't care, but I want them to have an appreciation for the finesse of hostility and speed.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. No, I agree.

Gerard Braud: They have to be able to empathize with their communications team. They also have to be smart enough to know if the communications team isn't doing it right. If the communications team is operating on flawed assumptions that we should be replying to everyone who writes a comment about our food recall, and nobody in the organization is jumping up and going, "No. That's the exact opposite of what we should be doing," then we've got a problem.

Katie Priebe: I agree. That speed factor that we were talking about, how quickly? There's a graph I found last night, just talking about the number of posts on social media in one minute, like how many hours of YouTube videos are uploaded, how many Tweets are sent out, Facebook Likes and posts. I thought that was really interesting, but what are your thoughts on sending out some form of communication? What's that timeline look like? Do you think that if an organization is dealing with a crisis that either originated on social or didn't but maybe it's more of a social focused issue, how fast do you think they need to get communication out?

Gerard Braud: In my crisis communications plan, one of the things that I do different in my plans from other people is I put timelines to achieve certain tasks and complete certain tasks and specifically assign tasks to people to do in a certain amount of time. In every one of the plans, I have the rule that a corporation or an official organization needs to have a statement out to the world in one hour or less of the event going public, what I describe as the flashpoint.

I always admonish everyone that it's 59 minutes too long, but I put the one hour as a reasonable to make them move fast because most organizations that I find wait three to five hours before putting out an official statement. In a social media world, you've already lost control of the narrative by that time. I'm a contrarian, and I'm a maverick, and I'm looking for better ways to do things. I'm looking at the constant pain problem and predicament and trying to solve it.

Part of what I did when I invented my crisis communications system is I started writing pre-written news releases that anticipate every question you would get asked in a news conference. I write either a direct answer or a plausible answer, either through a benign statement, a multiple choice option, or a fill-in-the-blank option. I have hundreds of them that I give my clients when they license my material, so that generally within 10 minutes of knowing what the crisis is, you can copy edit the document and have it ready to go on your news website, on your corporate newsreel. Then you can use social media to drive traffic to it as you see fit. That's my way of working around the pain problem and predicament.

Then the other thing is, if you sit in a war room, and you watch. Why is the statement not going out? The problems include the PR person started with a blank page and spent 30 to 45 minutes writing their best effort and probably over-wordsmithing it. Not really being fast because they've never worked in a newsroom. One of the advantages I had of working in a newsroom is I learned to be fast.

The second thing is, once they finish their first draft, they take it in to a bunch of analytical people who fight over commas and semantics. I've really seen this happen, fighting over, "Should we call it an event? Let's just call it a crisis." "No, it's not a crisis. Call it an incident." They fight over this word, and they pontificate. The more people that you have in the room, the more opinions you have. Then they fight over commas, parenthetical phrases in sentences. What I did by writing all of these pre-written news releases is most sentences have no commas, so I eliminated that fight. What's the pain problem and predicament? Commas? Write a sentence without a comma.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, take them out.

Gerard Braud: Fight over the benign words on a clear sunny day. Every one of these documents that I've written can be proofed by a lawyer or an executive on a clear sunny day so that when they need to use

them, you already know what the language is. You should take time out of your schedule to have somebody in a position of authority to read all 75 of these pre-written news releases or all 150 of them, however many I've given you and know today, this language is good. "We can use this, and I trust my PR person to use it."

Katie Priebe: Definitely.

Gerard Braud: That's my goal for managing speed. The problem with it is I have just a tiny, tiny number of people who actually use my system. I might get 10 to 15 new users a year, so it's a slow process of changing one company at a time.

Katie Priebe: Right, and do you think that, too, part of that struggle maybe is their culture? It's hard for one person to change the culture?

Gerard Braud: I actually know the answer. The answer is denial. I learned this after Hurricane Katrina. I was very angry at how Katrina went down because I live just outside of New Orleans. Fifteen years before Hurricane Katrina, when I was an intrepid young reporter, I did a report that predicted all of the flooding. I had done some investigate work and found some new data that showed that a 12-foot levy doesn't hold back a 20-foot wave. This storm was on the perfect path to put a 20-foot wave in there, which meant you needed to use your crisis communications, your communications skills to evacuate the city.

The mayor was an idiot and didn't do it. He was in denial of how bad it would be. He waited too late to make key decisions about his responsibilities. Life-saving decisions that should have been made his first day in office, he waited until 24 hours before complete annihilation was going to happen.

Katie Priebe: Wow.

Gerard Braud: I was very angry afterwards. I was somewhere between sad and angry that I couldn't have done anything. As hard as I had tried 15 years before, I couldn't persuade people. Now some communities, I made a big impact in. Five communities evacuated, had no fatalities. Everything went according to plan, but the biggest city didn't. I was talking to a friend of mine, who's a psychologist, afterwards. She called out human denial as the most potent behavior of humans. She said it was right up there with sexual desire, and possibly higher than sexual desire is denial, denial of how bad things are going to get.

In corporations, her advice to me back in 2005 and 2006 kept me from going nuts in my business, because to people like you and I, Katie, it's self-evident, but we're a rare breed that it's self-evident to us. Most organizations ... Most airlines will look at United and go, "Man. I hope that doesn't happen to us," instead of making a change.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, and learning from another competitor's mistake or just what's going on.

Gerard Braud: Exactly. If the chemical company down the street blows up, the next day all the other chemical companies usually go, "Man. I hope we don't have that happen." Whereas, someone like me is going to say, "Hey. This happened in our industry. Let's put this on the agenda for our vulnerability discussion on our once a month crisis management team meeting."

Again, that goes back to how to get a seat at the table, and the reason to get the seat at the table is to make it more self-evident to leaders, and to get the buy-in from the leaders to do the right thing and communicate rapidly. Before, during, and after the crisis rather than letting the crisis happen and try to fix it on the back end. Too many people in public relations pride themselves on getting called in after the crisis and doing all of the positive stuff meant to restore someone's reputation after the crisis. That's what most people think crisis communications is, is the glory of being the savior after the crisis.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, to save the brand, save the company.

Gerard Braud: Yeah, whereas my whole shtick is to be the invisible face that never let it happen.

Katie Priebe: Oh, I agree. That goes into the post-crisis, just the preparation aftermath. Like you said, we want to make sure that we're going to try and have this not happen at all and really focus on that planning stage, and if it does happen, we're able to deal with it correctly. Then what is something that you're seeing with companies on the back end that either they're not doing or they're neglecting or in denial about? What do you recommend for the aftermath? Say they did have a plan. They went through a crisis. What should they do on the back end?

Gerard Braud: There's a couple of phrases that they should always use. There are a couple of phrases that they shouldn't use. If we use United Airlines as a good example of on the back end, their initial statements about the crisis were flawed. Therefore, never make a

statement that you don't have 100% certainty about. Instead, use phrases like, "We will immediately conduct an investigation to find out what happened, how it happened, and how we keep it from happening again."

You have to have phrases that take ownership to look at it, rather than putting out a statement that says, "Our employees told us we had an unruly passenger," when minutes later a video will clearly show the passenger was not unruly. In those immediate minutes, you have to be able to put out statements that do no harm. That requires having the intelligence to write smart, quotable, benign statements on a clear sunny day before the crisis ever happens, which is what I do in that library.

Also in the aftermath, you can't make statements that show that you're oblivious to your problems or that you're oblivious to what everyone else sees. Again, if we use United, the CEO as he finally gets around to making apologies says, "That's not who we are." The cynic in me goes, "No, that's exactly who you are. We all clearly watched it. It was who you are, and the fact that it happens indicates that it is who you are."

Now there's a fraternity that's in trouble because of some racial slurs associated with a "Cinco de Drinko" party being offensive. The fraternity puts out a statement that says, "That's not who we are." No, it clearly is who you are. We have video on it.

Katie Priebe: We have video, yeah.

Gerard Braud: A lot of people in PR are not good enough word nerds, and they set their executives up for failure. I think another huge part is knowing how to take ownership and say you're sorry at the right time and to hash out the language with the legal team, because too many executives value the opinion of their legal team over the value of their corporate communications team. The legal team will always say, "If you say you're sorry, you're taking ownership of it, and plaintiff's attorney will get more money from you." I'm sorry. If you yank a guy off a plane, and you give him a concussion, a broken nose, and he loses two teeth, and he's bloody and disoriented, there's nothing you can say that's going to give plaintiff's attorney more ammunition than the video that's already out there.

As a journalist, I interviewed so many angry families who would tell me in their tears, "You know what? They never said they were sorry, and I want them to pay for it." You've got to understand the human nature of one individual wanting to cause and inflict as

much pain upon you the organization as you the organization inflicted upon me. "I want you to feel my pain and my tears and my angst," so it's that nature that drives the plaintiff's attorney anyway. The difference of the amount of the settlement I don't think is significant enough to avoid saying you're sorry. A million here, a million there. What's the difference? Say you're sorry, and regain public trust.

Katie Priebe: And mean it, you know?

Gerard Braud: Yeah. United finally did the right thing, which is settle out of court. Make this thing go away. That's part of crisis management, is make the crisis go away. Sometimes the way to make the crisis go away is to write a big fat check and be done with it. Part of what I see in organizations, especially when there is an external attorney with billable hours is I think there's a conflict of interest that an attorney wants to litigate and bill for hours.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, build it out and extend it.

Gerard Braud: Whereas if I had a crisis communications guy make the crisis end, they just lost all that billable money. I cost them money, so fixing it on the back end is about regaining trust. One of the best ways to fix it on the back end is to call out what the problems were. Do a root cause analysis and find what was the core problem, and change policies and announce it. Generally when I go into an organization, I'm going to announce a three, five, or seven-point plan that changes policies and procedures so that the crisis isn't repeated. I make the story about the changes taking place rather than making the story about the crisis. I want to show tangible evidence that we're not repeating this mistake.

Katie Priebe: That makes sense. That's good. Cool. No, that's good. This is really helpful. Is there anything that I missed, or anything that you want to touch on as it relates to this topic that we talked about or maybe didn't talk about?

Gerard Braud: I think that covers most of it, and you're welcome to call me back as you start writing. If you see there's a hole in something, I'm happen to help you.

Katie Priebe: Okay. No, that sounds great. Yeah, this is really helpful, so this is great. What I'll do is take our conversation ... I took notes here, but just read through or listen again to our conversation and take notes. Then as I'm writing, I will keep you posted. I may have possibly other questions. If not, I'll keep you posted in general, just to let you know when the paper is done and everything.

Matthew Furman, Chief Communications and Public Affairs Officer for Best Buy Corporate

The interview with Matthew Furman was recorded on Monday, May 8, 2017 and lasted about one hour. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Katie Priebe: All right. Okay. Let's see. For your title within the paper, what would you like that to be?

Matthew Furman: It's Chief Communications Public Affairs Officer.

Katie Priebe: Sounds good.

Matthew Furman: Sounds fancy.

Katie Priebe: Let's start I guess with pre-crisis. The planning stages for companies and organizations, and give me your thoughts on the importance of planning for an issue, that you may not know what that issue will be, but planning in general.

Matthew Furman: The need to plan is very relative to the size of the company and space it's in, or some companies that because of the work they do, the likelihood of a substantial crisis impacting their business is pretty remote. Even for those companies, I'd suggest they do it. It's not quite as urgent.

The average company that interacts with consumers, that makes things, that provides services that it have consumer interaction with, or just high profile in any regard or could be high profile if something went wrong, those companies all have to do something.

It starts with the basic, which is what are the risks we face, likely to unlikely. You obviously spend more of your time on the likely than you do on the unlikely. Although, there's something called the One Percent Doctrine, are you familiar with that?

Katie Priebe: No.

Matthew Furman: The One Percent Doctrine, the thesis of the One Percent Doctrine is the odds of something happening are 1%, but if they do, they're cataclysmic. Literally, my company will shut down. Very unlikely, cataclysmic. On that I would spend some time as well. Then you sort of do gradations from that as an extreme to less likely, less cataclysmic, to more likely.

It's identifying risks. It's identifying how you would mitigate those risks. Often people think of crisis as or crisis response as the only name of the game, but first is crisis mitigation. One of the roles that you or I could play in a company is to say, "Here are the four crises I think could happen. By the way, in three of those cases, we can do something obvious to mitigate it."

I'll give you, it's a bit of a sort of sad example, but there are companies in which the entire leadership of the company flies on one plane. If that plane crashes, that is a [crosstalk 00:02:15] pretty substantial crisis for that company, as opposed to why don't we create a policy in which only half of the executive team gets to travel on any given plane. Right? I've identified a potential crisis and I've mitigated it.

Once you get past the mitigation stage you then go to the things we've discussed in class, like who would be, what resources do I need, who would be a good ally, what do I need to understand about the crisis, can I prepare statements that get me 80% of where I need to go so that in the moment I'm not thinking those things through. I may have others pull something off the shelf.

The notion of a book, a physical book, is legitimate. There should be a physicality to it. I know I turn the page and it's an airplane crash crisis. I turn the page and here are the things I need to check in with, here are the people I need to tell. The early days of a crisis is something as basic as who knows and who doesn't. You don't want to sometimes tell everyone because you don't want to leak it out because it's a crisis, but it's still private.

On the other hand, I better make sure the people who need to know, do. They always occur Sunday mornings at two in the morning, right? Those are some of the [inaudible 00:03:24].

Katie Priebe: Thank you. Awesome.

Matthew Furman: Here, you [inaudible 00:03:31] cookies?

Katie Priebe: Oh my goodness. Thank you so much.

Katie Priebe: Thank you.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, that is true. They always occur at Sunday mornings at two in the morning.

Matthew Furman: Of course.

Katie Priebe: In your experience, what are, either you could speak from the BestBuy lens, or just companies in general. What do you think companies are doing well, and what are companies not doing well from the preparations standpoint?

Matthew Furman: First, I don't think companies invest in the right resources. I think they rely on a team of communicators who they believe would be able to help them, but it's not a team that's been tested or has been trained. The illusion is that we all do the same thing, and any communicator can do anything. That's just not true. There is something to experience. There is something to training, there is something to practice. They get themselves what I would call essentially a crisis fig leaf. I've got somebody, it'll be fine. Then when it happens, it all crumbles. That's the first thing they do.

The second thing is at the most senior executive level, nobody makes it clear that crisis is something that should be jumped on. Something that should be dealt with aggressively. The biggest risk you have is the self delusion moment which [inaudible 00:04:49] says, "This isn't a big deal," or, "This will pass." Or you know we really need to focus on the business, we can't worry about these things. It's those moments where you begin to lose, and you lose quickly, as we discussed in class. It's all about speed.

You want to have a leadership that understands that and appreciates it and are willing to behave that way. Sometimes it occurs naturally. You have a CEO who knows this and [inaudible 00:05:13] virtues, and other times you've got to teach them. [inaudible 00:05:19] the biggest mistake they make is they believe they're prepared but are neither structurally nor culturally prepared to respond.

Katie Priebe: You were talking about that preparation. How do you speak to them, a CEO or the executive leadership team about ... What's maybe the scare tactic or the examples that you need to provide to executive leadership to get them prepared or to get that going in their minds?

Matthew Furman: You find people in their space. You find similar companies, similar size, similar geography, obviously similar business. When appropriate, when it happens and it always does, you say to the banking CEO, "This is what your fellow CEO dealt with at Wells Fargo. I'm not suggesting we have the same problem at our bank but we could have a problem like this. What will we do, are we prepared?"

The questions about preparation are do we know what we would say? Do we know who would speak on our behalf? Do we know how would we speak, when would we speak? Whose permission do we need? Do we need to consult the board? If so, let's do it in advance. These are good governance issues that so frequently don't come up until it's too late.

Again, going back to the mistake, it's we're all adults. We all can project into the future and know that if it's happened to you, it can happen to me. That's why I wear a seatbelt. I've never been in a car accident, but I know what happens all the time. I put on a seatbelt. It's the same concept, yet on this subject, so, so often, people ignore it. Or worse, they fool themselves into believing they're prepared.

Katie Priebe: When managing a crisis on social media, what's been your experience with some of the best practices? Maybe there's something that's originated on social media or has not originated on social media but spills into it. Is there a protocol or best practice that you recommend starting with?

Matthew Furman: Yeah. I think it comes down to two basic concepts. One is recognition, the other is response. It's recognizing a crisis from just the endless, mean spirited chatter that occurs on social media, which spikes and becomes a crisis. Do you have some mechanism formal, informal, database or gut based to assess something in saying yes or no. Is that something that's applicable at two o'clock in the morning on a Sunday as much as it is two o'clock in the afternoon on a Tuesday? If it's based on one person's gut and that person's on a cruise that week.

United Airlines apparently, what I'm told is the first crisis they had when the girls couldn't get on board the plane with leggings, their Chief Communications Officer was in New Zealand, which just poses structural [inaudible 00:08:07]. I mean with, the middle of the night when your event's happening, yes you can wake people up but there's a hesitancy to do that. They're disconnected from what's going on, they're far away, right. The recognition is critical and we can talk more about that, if you want.

Then there's the response. We discussed in the class, response should be measured in minutes, not hours, certainly not days. The responses can be the lesson I learned from airplane accidents. I would go from briefing to press, to briefing the victims families. These are people who show up because they've lost a loved one. All too often, they ask you questions you don't have the answer to.

Not you can't answer because you're not allowed to, you literally don't know.

The lesson I learned is, never good enough to say, "I can't tell you that." You have to explain why. The reason you have to explain why is that's ultimately what reflects the fact that I value you as a person. I have sympathy for you. I'm paying the appropriate amount of respect to you. At the core, that's what people want in the moment, they want genuine empathy.

The person who says, "Listen, I can't tell you that," doesn't demonstrate empathy, they demonstrate something factual based. The person who says, "Listen, I can't tell you, but let me tell you why, this investigation is a long term process and at this point we can't speculate what happened because there literally could be 52 things. If I tell you one of those things that it could be and I'm wrong, it'll hurt my credibility to you and everybody else, so I hope you understand I can't tell you." That's a very different conversation. It's also quick. I don't wait. I don't say, "I'll get back to you in a week." I tell you in the moment and if I don't have an answer, I explain why.

If I can, I explain when I will have an answer. "Listen, I'm really sorry, I won't know that answer until tomorrow. In the meantime I want you to know I'm working really hard on it." That applies whether you're talking to a victim's family or a reporter.

Katie Priebe: Do you feel like timing is important with that, too? Is there a sense of, obviously speed, but a sense of timing of notifying the victims first versus the press, or the press first versus the victims? Is it kind of just informing waves of people at the same time?

Matthew Furman: To the extent possible, you want to manage timing in a way that's as respectful as possible. My experience with timing has generally been in a crisis. It's fool's gold. Things are just leaking out and so what you go for generally if you're me is you go for scale. You go for I'm not going to notify you before everyone else, but what I'm going to do is make sure you know at the same time as everyone else. I go for the mass as opposed to the deliberate sequence.

Katie Priebe: That makes sense. Switching gears a little bit. When managing a crisis on social media such as the United issue or something like that, who, do you think, talk to me a little bit about your protocol or best practices with responding on social media, or do you like to take that offline and have some sort of a statement on the website, or do you respond directly to people on social media, or does that fuel the fire?

Matthew Furman: I think you have at the starting point you have to respond within the venue in which it came up. I think you're kidding yourself if you do anything other than that. I think your response is there's no such thing as a one to one response anymore. I don't know if there ever was, but there certainly isn't now.

The lesson I would offer is a) respond within the vehicle in which it came to you, so if it came over Twitter, respond over Twitter, but respond in a fully scalable way. If I'm dealing with you on a crisis, so let's say it's a product recall, and which people are being hurt, so it's a real crisis for a product company. You hit me on Twitter and you say, "I got burnt by this product." You want to say the same thing to you as I say to everybody else.

If you're the first person who has said it, so let's say the product recall and things are all quiet. Then suddenly you show up with, "Here's a picture of my burns." I'm not going to respond directly to you. What I'm going to do is I'm going to put something out on Twitter and then more broadly that says there are initial reports of some people being burned, here is what we're going to have to say, and your response. I don't waste my time coming back to you because I know that between your followers and my followers, it's going to blow up.

Why would I ever want to be behind the curve? At this point I can see the pitch coming and it's a curve ball. Why would I ever want to swing where it was as opposed to where it's going? Where it's going is from one to one, to mass, so I'm going to go straight to mass. Does that make sense?

Katie Priebe: Yeah, mm-hmm (affirmative), that makes sense. Do you find traditional media, such as newspapers or TV outlets more challenging to deal with versus social media influencers, or do you follow social media influencers, like the bloggers with the extreme, the big audience reach that are-

Matthew Furman: Traditional media is almost uniformly better in either way. They actually follow the rules, they're accessible. I can call any newsroom in the country almost anytime day or night, someone's going to answer a phone. You have a website, you have a managing editor in the case of a newspaper. I mean I have recourse, I can find you.

One of the biggest stresses professionally that I've run across is something as simple as some blogger somewhere writes a story, and it gets picked up by Yahoo and now it's on the front page of Yahoo News. Go find Yahoo. Call somebody at Yahoo. Who do

you know, right? There's no number, there's no desk. That blogger, forget about it. I mean that's worthless. That guy's in his pajamas in his mom's basement.

I now have something that's hurting me at great scale because Yahoo is one of the most trafficked websites in the world, and you have no recourse. In that case, when I first got here that was happening to me frequently. Within three weeks, I found somebody who works for me found the managing editor of Yahoo News, somehow, through a friend of a friend or friend. Called him up and said, [inaudible 00:14:06]. Went there, had lunch with him and a couple of his top staff, gave him a briefing on what BestBuy was doing, but more importantly, just tried to establish a relationship for the specific goal of when this happens to me next, who do I call?

I said to him at the end of it, "You know, my guess is lots of people are doing this. Thank you so much for taking your time. I'm sure we're one of a thousand companies who have been through your offices." You know what he said to me? "You're the first person who's ever called me up."

Katie Priebe: Really?

Matthew Furman: Everyone else just took it. Just sat there and said, "It's on Yahoo, I can't do anything about it." I said, "Are you kidding me?" I mean this is wrong. I can prove it's wrong. Anything but if you even identify this remotely as a journalist, as the Yahoo people do, would take you down. I just have to tell them. Help me find who, so I did, and [crosstalk 00:14:49]-

Katie Priebe: They took it down-

Matthew Furman: Soon it got better. Yeah. Now I had somebody in my contact list I could call. Those are the kinds of things that traditional journalists afford you that social media does not.

Katie Priebe: Do you, sounds like you encourage that for your teams too, to reach out to these journalists, build out one on one relationship and that really helps when you're dealing with a crisis [crosstalk 00:15:11]-

Matthew Furman: We have 700. We pitch all our own stories. We successfully landed a thousand, I mean 11,000 positive stories last year. As a consequence, we have, last count we have 700 active reporter relationships, all around the country. There isn't a market of any

size in this country where we don't at least know a couple of the TV stations and the local newspaper. Which means if we know two of the three or two of the four major stations and there's a crisis, at least two of them we can make something go away or we can influence the story, certainly with the paper.

The young men and women who sit out there who do this all day, they're my first absolute line of defense against a locally hatched crisis. They get to find out quickly what it is, and if possible, they need to kill it. I'll give you an example of one that was extraordinary.

We had two holidays ago, we had a delivery route guy, doesn't work for BestBuy, is a contractor, had a BestBuy shirt on. He was delivering a package to the front door and inexplicably decided that was the place in which he wanted to pee. He literally peed on someone's front door. Not any malice, he just let it go.

The ring doorbell that has the camera in it, which we had just sold to the customer a week before, recorded this whole thing. They put it on social media, it gets picked up by the local FOX affiliate, with whom we have a relationship. One of the people out there literally talked the FOX station out of using it. I would've bet you a thousand dollars [inaudible 00:16:39]. It's perfect television, right?

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthew Furman: It's perfect television.

Katie Priebe: Right.

Matthew Furman: They decided not to use it. Why? Because we have a relationship with them and we've helped them out on a number of occasions.

Katie Priebe: That makes sense, that's good. Then, national media or just media in general, I guess, with just the changing landscape of media and newsrooms getting smaller and fake news and all of that. Is there anything that or any discussions that you're having either at BestBuy or you're hearing other corporations have about managing a crisis in that space?

Matthew Furman: Yeah. The national media, one of the nice things about national media is that there tends to be some longevity. If you invest the time in finding the right producer, that's a relationship you can call on for a couple of years. Having somebody in every newsroom, every major newsroom that you can call on, nine times out of 10, it

won't be their beat. They will be on their day off. They won't have anything to do with it. They'll at least be able to make the introduction to you and their colleague who can.

A number of times I've gotten things resolved just by virtue of you as a producer saying, "Hey, Matt's a good guy, can you take his call," to a support senior producer, the senior producer suddenly takes my call. Now I get to pitch my case. Again, most of the time if I say to the senior producer, "Listen, this isn't true, let me tell you why," they say, "Oh okay, we'll pull it down." For that relationship, I'd be dialing for dollars. I might get there, not as quickly and not as efficiently.

Katie Priebe: At the magnitude of BestBuy's reach, for example, you know, all over the country and ... How do you know that some of these stories are coming? Are you getting calls in requesting a statement-

Matthew Furman: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Katie Priebe: Here and there? How do you keep track of that?

Matthew Furman: Traditional media still calls in. We set up when I got here, press@bestbuy.com, which has an email that gets 24 hours a day, and then a phone number that goes with it. Someone always has the phone on, all the time. Someone's always checking email all the time, and 99% of our reporter contacts, aside from our beat reporters who call us all the time, 99% of our other contacts come in through the press outline.

We promise prompt responses and they get it, and so people keep coming back to it, which is great. We know about stuff because it's easy to get us. If we didn't answer the phone call or we didn't have anything easily found on the website, we wouldn't know. Generally, people want to comment.

Among social media, less so. Bloggers, less so and sometimes you're just confronted with it and [crosstalk 00:19:16]-

Katie Priebe: Right, and then deal with it in real time?

Matthew Furman: Yeah.

Katie Priebe: One of the things you talked about in class was obviously internal communication. Can you talk to me a little bit about your concept

or your idea around BestBuy's social media policy, and how that is communicated throughout the organization?

Matthew Furman: Our social media policy's pretty straightforward in that at a senior level, you are discouraged from using social media, using your social media to talk about BestBuy. Rather than try and educate or create guardrails or training or whatever, I've just said, "Please stop." People did. There's lots of senior executives on social media but their comments about BestBuy are negligible or nonexistent. I've always wondered why people work really hard to create these structures when you can simply just say, "Please don't."

Katie Priebe: Please don't do it.

Matthew Furman: Just don't do it. It's easier.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. Just going back to our idea or our discussion about speed. How important is it, you know there are some, at least I'm just being very generic. There are some executive leaders who maybe are not on social media or don't understand the speed of Facebook or Twitter. They understand that that's a social media platform, but they're not on it day to day, to truly understand that how quickly information can spread.

How do you speak to them about preparation or dealing with a crisis in real time and getting a statement out in 45 minutes if you needed to?

Matthew Furman: The best example or the best way to do it is to give them an example. I've literally done timelines, you know? First Tweet, 12:13 p.m., first story on a blog, you know 12:20, first network or major newspaper, 1:15. You literally, it was an hour arc between the first tweet to CNN.com. You can't argue with that. You don't have to have personal experience to be able to extrapolate. If that happened to them, it could happen to me. Yeah.

Katie Priebe: Is there any examples of a social media crisis that you've either followed from another corporation or that you've dealt with that has stood out to you in your career? Something you either learned a lot from or you were really proud of how your organization or your team handled it?

Matthew Furman: Social media or just crisis in general?

Katie Priebe: Whatever you have. Probably-

Matthew Furman: I can give you both.

Katie Priebe: Okay, social media, then.

Matthew Furman: Social media, not for me. I think I mentioned in class the whole notion of pitching a mobile phone sale on the serial podcast. Very small thing. The only thing we did there was we pulled it down quickly. It was 15 minutes from the time we were notified to the time we had pulled it down and apologized. Literally on the phone standing by the window and said, "Here's what we're going to say." Someone typed it in, done, 15 minutes, pretty fast. I mean go beat that. It just died. There were a few, but it died. That's the gold standard.

Now that was not one in which I had to gather any data, there was no two sides to it, there was no facts I needed to have. I didn't need anyone's permission, I just made the decision and it went away. You're not often empowered that way but if you are, that's good.

Form a removed perspective, I've been, I thought the way United Airlines handled again their first crisis, which you know the one about the leggings, right?

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthew Furman: That one was remarkable because they were both slow to respond, best I could tell, and also never, I shouldn't say never, but not until late into it did they give the actual facts, which are these are passengers flying non-revenue, in which case they have to follow company policy. This wasn't a regular passenger, which of course we would let them on with leggings. You're required to wear a coat and tie if you're a man, I'm not going to let you on with leggings, right?

The notion of not just saying it, now is that because they didn't know? Maybe. Not knowing in that circumstance, is unacceptable. There's a person at the gate making that decision. Get that person on the phone. By the way, that person usually is a colleague. Get the colleague on the phone. By the way, the captain was probably informed, right? Get the captain. There's five or six people who had firsthand knowledge. If it hasn't filtered up to you by then, figure it out. Get it done. Move mountains. Do what you've got to do.

There's always an answer. People don't do things irrationally, generally. They may do things stupidly, but there's always an answer. Even if you think the answer is stupid, at least there's an answer. Does that make sense?

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah, that makes sense.

Matthew Furman: I followed that one.

Katie Priebe: Do you think United, in that particular situation or even the other issues that they've been dealing with, do you think they just were not prepared? Do you think there's a lack of preparation or truly an understanding of how to deal with it, or where do you think they went wrong from the bigger picture of, or how could something like this happen to that large of an organization?

Matthew Furman: My guess is airlines, because of the inherent risk associated with flying lots of planes around the world, have a pretty good preparation for crisis. I don't think it was about preparation. I think it was about appreciation, meaning I don't appreciate how bad this is or could be, which is why I said to you in class, you have to overreact. You can always dial it back but you have to overreact. You can't catch up to something. You can relax in the face of it.

It's hard. The leggings thing would have been hard but it's in that moment that you have to be well rounded. You have to be well read, you have to know what's going on. I think the reason why the leggings thing got so odd, it was because it was evocative of people wearing burkas or other religious garments. This notion of are you that restrictive, right? I think that's why it took off.

It was about young girls, who was the impression that it was a man telling young girls they couldn't? There was a feminism thing there, right? Sometimes it's obvious, but often there's an intangible cocktail that when put together, makes it particularly combustible. Having the ability as an individual or as a group to look at that and say, "This one could be combustible," jump on it, that's the trick. That's the art of it all. That's where someone like you could add value, because you spit on the other side. You've sat in newsroom meetings in which you say, "That's going to be a story." I've got video, I have a sympathetic character and I have a character that's not sympathetic. Done.

Katie Priebe: Totally. Yeah.

Matthew Furman: I mean literally, and we've had these conversations here. The guy peeing on the porch, that has to be a story, right? Unless you can talk somebody out of it but yes, it was going to be a story.

Katie Priebe: Especially too because the technology that they're using to record it is BestBuy technology and then-

Matthew Furman: Exactly-

Katie Priebe: That's just like-

Matthew Furman: That's a gift.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, that's a gift.

Matthew Furman: That's the kicker.

Katie Priebe: Right, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthew Furman: That's the anchor chatter after you come out of the package. Oh, did you see that, it's actually BestBuy. Done.

Katie Priebe: No, that's interesting. What do you think it takes to be a good crisis counselor, either on just a crisis in general or specifically a social media crisis? What kind of skills and characteristics are useful or important?

Matthew Furman: It's one of those things where the more life experience you have, the better you'll be at it. You can gather life experience through talking to people like me, observing things, watching other people, saying what did they do right, what did they do wrong. I frequently have the conversation in my head, even at this point in my career when I see something I say, would I do the same thing. I write the statement in my head.

I'll be watching Good Morning America, and I'll see what's happening and I'll set the statement up. I'll begin to edit it. What could I do better, what would I have done, or, that's really fricking good, I would do that. That was a beaut, that was genius, you know? I always try to learn from what's in front of me. I'm not saying that like you need to read a lot. Literally, take every opportunity to soak it all in because it's happening all the time. Most people are not doing it well. It won't take you long to figure that out, that's half the battle. Knowing bad is almost as good as knowing good.

The second is working on your demeanor. I'm not saying you particularly. To be an effective counselor in times of crisis you have to be both calm and urgent. You have to be both thoughtful and activator. Requires both in the moment. Those don't come naturally to most people. You can learn them, but it doesn't come naturally. That's what I would say from a sort of human perspective, what you need.

Then on a practical level, the better you know the business, the better you're going to be. Being a consultant in times of crisis is a lot harder. Now, I shouldn't say it's a lot harder. It has both its vices and virtues. I bet you could figure out what the obvious virtue is of being a consultant, which is scale. You get to see lots of crises. You get to see a lot of people make mistakes. You get to learn lots of corporate cultures and so you can extrapolate easily.

The vice of it all is that you're just not going to know the business as well as I would about this product, you [crosstalk 00:29:08] help me, which is why I in all but the most extreme circumstances would never call for outside help, because I'm good at it, but more importantly I know the business in a way that no consultant-

Katie Priebe: No one else will.

Matthew Furman: Yeah, your learning curve's going to be too steep, is going to take you too long, and therefore your likelihood of making a mistake is too great. Of many things in life, being true to yourself is sort of a core concept in many things in life, but never more true than in a crisis. You have to respond in a way that's consistent with corporate culture and helpful to its business. Those consistencies and helpfulnesses are not always apparent unless you really know the business.

Katie Priebe: Did it take just for your own personal journey, did it take you ... You came in obviously with a lot of crisis experience already. How long did it take you I guess to learn the business of BestBuy where you truly felt like the ins and outs when dealing with a critical issue or-

Matthew Furman: I would say there are still places in which I'm a little fuzzy and need to check. I would say I'm not done, five years in. The thing that I have is indisputable credential. I can take shortcuts. I mean if you're an expert in one part of our business, I can say to you, "Listen, here are the three things I want to know. Don't tell me four, go." Then the minute you start wandering off I can say, "No, no, go back to the three," because I know exactly what I need to know.

The proof of whether I know something is can I explain it. That's never more acute than in a crisis. I have a crisis with our credit card portfolio, let's say. I don't really know how it works but I need to go explain it to a reporter, so I come to you who runs our credit card business. Three things I need to know, don't give me four. You give them to me, then I go to explain it.

I've gotten to the point where I can distill down my need very quickly, and I have the credibility to ask those specific questions, as opposed to the beginning of my career I might've said, "Tell me what I need to know," and then blah, blah, blah, blah, blah-

Katie Priebe: It turns into a novel.

Matthew Furman: Only 20% of it's useful.

Katie Priebe: That makes sense. That's helpful, that's good. Let's see here. From your perspective in either BestBuy or just the corporations that you've been at, Mars and Google and stuff, that large of an organization, are you dealing with a critical issue or a crisis every single day? What's kind of the ebbs and flow of a company that large and what you constitute as a crisis or a critical issue?

Matthew Furman: No, not every day. Hopefully not. Crises come in obviously all different sizes and shapes. I would say that at a large company in which you're consumer-facing in one way or the other. Food, in the case of Mars. CNN in the case of entertainment, or Google in the case of technology are all customer-facing or BestBuy, you probably see once a month something that could be big and a couple of times a month, something that could just be a little painful, but not big.

By the way, that could be big, [inaudible 00:32:27], 10% at most. If I'm seeing 12 could be bigs a year, one maybe two actually become something close to big. Of those, I can usually mitigate half of [inaudible 00:32:42]. Maybe one big crisis a year.

Katie Priebe: Talk to me a little bit about the aftermath of a crisis. Maybe when it's a big crisis where it's making national media and has kind of got out of the news cycle. How important is the cleanup and the learnings after a crisis, or what's your best practice there?

Matthew Furman: Yeah, there's something called the dead cat bounce in a crisis, just like in the stock market. Are you familiar with the dead cat bounce?

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthew Furman: Sometimes you hit rock bottom. You think it's done and it comes back upwards. There's always like a [inaudible 00:33:23]. First rule, when you think it's over, keep your crisis team together for at least another two days. I mean if it's a big crisis, don't abandon ship right away, that cat's going to bounce, I'd say always. It's almost like universal.

In terms of the aftermath, we've talked a lot about start where you want to end up. You ought to be early on, thinking about what you want this to look like when it's done. Includes what's the fallout? Often in a big corporate crisis, you're going to be dealing with predictable things like you're going [inaudible 00:33:58] lawsuits, for sure. You're going to have customer lawsuits in some cases, for sure. You're going to have executive firings or resignations, for sure, depending on ... You're going to have board turnover. You're going to have hostile takeover attempts. People view you as weakened.

Depending on what business you're in, the severity of the crisis, you can say these are the three things that are almost certainly going to happen. Beginning to build your story along the way. For instance, if you think the CEO is going to be weakened and in your own judgment you conclude that the CEO's going to be weakened but could survive, some crises you know the CEOs going to go, totally. Some crises it's unclear.

If one of your goals is to keep the CEO, then that dictates how you behave through the crisis, not just after. Big mistake to try and repair the image when it's all done. Start, because no one's watching anymore, no one's paying attention. It's already moved on. You want to start repairing the image when people are still paying attention. That's during the crisis, as an example, [inaudible 00:35:04].

Finally, depending on the type of crisis, don't underestimate its impact to the culture. There will be people who will be traumatized by it. The cultural change that can occur accidentally as the result of a crisis has to be watched. When you think about communications from an internal perspective, people can start becoming gun shy, start making the wrong decisions, can start turning on each other, can start becoming more risk taking. They'll view a crisis as well that wasn't that bad, you know, I'll try it myself, right? Whatever it is, don't forget the internal dynamic, which can be affect substantially by this kind of extreme event.

Katie Priebe: [inaudible 00:35:51], yeah, I like that. Let's see, let me go back to ... Just out of curiosity, I don't know if this ... Just the, like you said, having life experience behind dealing with crisis, how do you prepare yourself, I'm just thinking of me and my career, personally. How would I, stepping away from my graduate school project, how do you think I should prepare myself with, you know I can't add 10 years on to my experience tomorrow. How do you go through your year to year getting the most experience and insight into how this works?

Matthew Furman: You work in an agency in which you see lots of clients. You work in an agency in which you work with lots of people, presumably many of them more experienced than you. It's about conversation. I could, in this process, what am I conveying to you? I'm conveying to you the mistakes that I've made. You're aging yourself from a professional perspective just by virtue of listening to these conversations and asking the questions you're asking.

Let's say you only remember 10% of what I say, which is about right. If the 10%, if of that 10% one day in the next three or four years you find yourself in that exact circumstance, that's pretty damn cool [crosstalk 00:37:10], right?

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Matthew Furman: Or if you said, "Huh, that was interesting," so you're saying crisis can affect a culture, don't just look at it externally but make sure you look internally. If you're the person that's working with a client, like you and a senior partner let's say, and someone says, "Well what should we do," and the senior partner only focuses on the external and you can speak up and say, "You know, remember that culture can be affected by this." Everyone looks at you like, "Holy shit, where'd that come from," right, which is part of our original conversation.

I'm not saying I'm a genius. I'm saying some of what I'm saying is going to be useful-

Katie Priebe: Totally-

Matthew Furman: Remember it, if you continue the conversation not just with me but other people. Everyone's got a different view. My, I think I have a hyper, hyper practical view of everything. Some people will give you more theory, which can be really useful, too. Theory can make you sound smart. I sound street smart when I'm in a crisis. I sound like this is exactly what's about to happen to you. It's going

to hurt and it's going to last about two days, and then it's going to get better.

I'm giving you that as opposed to well listen, there's a theory and there's an arc to these things, and there's a narrative, or blah, blah, blah. I'm not dismissing those things. They're all useful. You pick what you want to sound like, depending on the moment or depending on your comfort, but you're able to do those things because you've talked to someone who's very practical, and you've talked to somebody who's very theoretical. Now you're amalgamable.

I would make a practice, if you could, of using the contacts and resources you have to find the people in town who have gone through crises and set up a time to chat with them. In 15 minutes, give me the three lessons you learned. What did you do right, what did you do wrong, what are the three lessons I should take away? You could create a template for yourself. You could email people and not even take up their time. "Sorry to bother you, looking to get better in my career, do you mind just telling me the one thing you did right, the one thing you did wrong, one lesson you think I should take away from it?"

I think you'd be shocked at how many people would be delighted-

Katie Priebe: Sure-

Matthew Furman: Right?

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Matthew Furman: Most people go through that kind of traumatic event and genuinely, it's the only time in life it's happened to them and they really want to talk about it, truth be told, right? You could get that out of them. It's both in town or outside of the Twin Cities. If you're hit rate is only one out of three, that's just a collection of data that you get one of two ways. My way, which is I lived it, or your way, which is you acquire. It can be done. It can be done. I mean there's just no question. You could get to be 70% as wise in half the time if you work at it.

Katie Priebe: Sure. That makes sense. To that question, is there anything I missed or what are, I guess I should start with what's one thing you think that I should take away from this conversation that would be important for my paper or in general? Yeah. We'll start there. Maybe three things.

Matthew Furman: Okay, so I'm afraid this won't [inaudible 00:40:04] be useful for your paper, but I hope it's useful for you. Is that a good use of your time?

Katie Priebe: Sure, yeah, definitely.

Matthew Furman: I think you want to work on your, the way you show up, particularly. I give feedback, not from around here, I give very candid feedback and if you don't mind I'll offer you some in the spirit of what do you need to do to prepare.

You have actually great credibility having been on air. Don't think in your question, maybe you're just really modest, which would be great, so don't lose it if you are. It's rare. I'm guessing it's not modest. My guess it's sort of like this. You don't refer back to that. Your questions, you don't frame it. In class, you never really did.

You said when we were out of the room, you told me we were on air and I remembered that, but for the rest of the class you never mentioned it again. Maybe it's your view of [inaudible 00:40:59] classmates but I'm going to say it one more time. Well when I was on television. Maybe that's what it is. Again, there's reasons for it, but drop all that baggage and start calling upon it because there is instant credibility that comes with it.

Katie Priebe: My experience in TV?

Matthew Furman: Right. I mean and meaningful experience. Madison's not the world's smallest market and you were both an anchor and a reporter, which is very different jobs, so you had a broader view. Morning television, which is a very distinct animal, too. I mean all those things have value that I don't have, right, and I never will. I would say use your fishnet well more often. That's the first.

The second, getting back to how do I show up in a crisis. You want to be both thoughtful and an activator and strategic, yet [inaudible 00:41:50]. It's how you show up. The advice I would give you is that there are roles you play, depending on the circumstance, and that at heart, I'm going to ask you this as a former question to the ... Maybe we get there together.

At my core, if I'm in a crisis and you come and help me, in my core, what am I looking from you? What's the core emotion I'm looking for you to satisfy?

Katie Priebe: I think you need me to be calm and intelligent and realistic.

Matthew Furman: Emotion. What's the core emotion? Yes, but what's the core emotion?

Katie Priebe: When I show up for a crisis?

Matthew Furman: Yes. You walk into my office and you say, "I'm here to help."

Katie Priebe: Confident.

Matthew Furman: What's the core emotion you're looking for? I need something satisfied. What is it [inaudible 00:42:42]?

Katie Priebe: Comfort.

Matthew Furman: Comfort. Right. I want comfort. What are the core characteristics of comfort?

Katie Priebe: Listening, no?

Matthew Furman: I mean it's a tool, but what's the core, how do I feel comfortable in that moment? What do you demonstrate?

Katie Priebe: I don't know. I mean I think you're-

Matthew Furman: I'm in trouble, and I want to be comforted. What's the number one characteristic that you demonstrate?

Katie Priebe: Hugs.

Matthew Furman: No, please don't [crosstalk 00:43:16]. The number one emotional characteristic you could demonstrate that would give me comfort in a time of crisis?

Katie Priebe: Emotional characteristic in a time of crisis. This is like body language?

Matthew Furman: No, this is just an emotion. I want to feel this about you.

Katie Priebe: That I've dealt with it before?

Matthew Furman: Okay, competence-

Katie Priebe: Yeah-

Matthew Furman: Yeah, but dig down one more, [inaudible 00:43:50] What does competence give you the ability to do, to prove to me?

Katie Priebe: That you're in good hands.

Matthew Furman: Good hands, right, that you've got my back. Are you going to fight for me.

Katie Priebe: That team mentality.

Matthew Furman: Not team-

Katie Priebe: No?

Matthew Furman: It's not about team, it's about me. I've hired you. Right now, I'm the one in crisis. Teams are bullshit. They're bullshit in that it's not a collective people feeling the same way. People [inaudible 00:44:13]. Let's call up the CEO of Company X. He's in crisis or she's in crisis. You've stepped in. They want to be comforted. How do they want to get to the comfort? They want to know that you will fight for them. They want to know that you understand them, you'll fight for them, you're capable, you're willing, you're eager. That's at its core. If you say to yourself, if I distill it all down, how do I demonstrate those characteristics? That goes to competence and competence and referring back to your background or whatever it is.

What's helpful to understand when you walk into situations, is what's the role I'm playing? It's a very different role than you'd be playing now. In this relationship I don't have any need for comfort and I don't need you to be competent. I need you to be respectful, I need you to be on time, I need you to be curious, engaging, there's lots of things I need but that's not one of them, right?

You deal with your colleagues at work, again the same thing. You go into a company to pitch them on a promotional effort. Again, it's a very distinct moment and each one of those are distinct moments that require different roles. The role that I see you playing now is you're pretty good. You seem engaged and interested and polite. What I struggle with is to see those other characteristics [crosstalk 00:45:27].

It's a little bit like what I suggested before in terms of watching how other people respond to crises on a superficial level, the statements, that kind of stuff. It's also about watching other people, how they physically respond to it. Beginning to model

some of that behavior. I think that if you want to be in this world, the single greatest thing you need to do is learn how to provide people with comfort when they need it. Comes in a couple different forms, but fundamentally, it's I've got your back and I'm capable of getting it done for you. I'm going to fight for you.

I can't ever say to you, "Look, this isn't a big deal." I can't even say to you, "Well I don't know your business, but." I can't even say to you, "You know, I've seen worse." I can't say it's not a big deal. I'm not giving you comfort because I want you to tell me whether it's a big deal or not, really, it's a big deal to you. I've seen worse, it doesn't sound like you're really there for me as much as you have been for other people. Or you know what I mean? We could come up with the slightly, what you'd perceive as being comforting, and because I'm looking for comfort, are not. Does that make sense?

Katie Priebe:

Yeah, that makes sense.

Greg Zimprich, Director of Global Business Communications at Honeywell

The interview with Greg Zimprich was recorded on Tuesday, May 16, 2017 and lasted about thirty minutes. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

- Katie Priebe: Are you? You're going to record it?
- Greg Zimprich: Yeah. Say that I said a certain thing like, "You swore". It was really, some really bad words. Kidding.
- Katie Priebe: All right. Put that by you. Okay. So the recording will just be ... I'll just say this? On the record. It's just for the transcription for the paper itself. Then I'll pull like a couple of nuggets for the paper and the analysis, and the best practices. Is that good?
- Greg Zimprich: You want a verbal?
- Katie Priebe: Yes, verbal.
- Greg Zimprich: Yes.
- Katie Priebe: I guess let's start with your thoughts on ... Maybe we've talked a little bit about this. You're thoughts on what companies are doing well and not doing well when it comes to managing a crisis on social media? In your experience.
- Greg Zimprich: Yeah. I mean, I probably am hesitant to name specific companies. But I think there are a number of companies in the consumer space who by nature of them being in closer conversation probably with consumers have a better feel for what consumers are thinking and saying. That do a much better job of managing social media because it truly is a conversation versus ... I think unfortunately a lot of the companies in the B2B space, companies who aren't necessarily used to dealing with consumers aren't always equipped because they don't always have that mindset. They're not thinking that way. Before social media, companies would get, or brands would get calls from consumers who were really upset about a brand, or really, really happy about it. It's kind of the 80/20 rule. The 10% who are really mad. The 10% who are really happy. Then the 80% in the middle you never hear from. The social media has given those consumers a voice. The companies who are accustomed to dealing with that voice usually do better as a general rule.

Now there are companies obviously, like Oreo and some of the other consumer package goods companies that really made a name for themselves by the way they actively go out and do things. There are some who do well and who have learned. I mean, let's face it there was no play book for social media. We just made it up as companies went along. And so the companies who learned and sometimes learned the hard way, I think Dominoes for example does a nice job but it wasn't easy and they learned the hard way about what works and doesn't work. Anyway I think that there's some companies out there who are doing a really good job. Sure.

Katie Priebe: How important is the planning stage before a crisis hits? Do you think that there's an of big importance there for companies?

Greg Zimprich: It's the most important thing. In fact, I would argue that it's probably 80% of the success or effectiveness of a plan is in the planning. Not in the execution necessarily. By the time a crisis hits you don't really have time to be thinking about execution and all the different parts of it. You should be on autopilot. You should be in pure reactive mode or even in proactive mode. Planning, I mean to me is far and above the most important element of it. It's knowing who your spokes people are, knowing who the key players are, knowing who the members of the team are going to be.

Katie Priebe: If you're really advanced maybe having a library of potential statements and positions. Issues management pre-work done that you can just pull up and call on. And going about it that way. And I think in the moment, the crisis communications execution ... to me it's always, it's super simple. It's the rules that we all learned when we would get in a fight on the playground. You stop what you're doing. You say you're sorry, and you say you're never going to do it again, right. It's that simple.

Greg Zimprich: Planning and having all the right components in place and all that part is really important. When you get in the mode of literally you're executing, it couldn't be more simple, right. I think you just can't put enough emphasis and I think that's where a lot of companies go wrong; is they don't put enough emphasis on the planning part. They come up short.

Katie Priebe: How Important is it, do you think for senior leadership to understand the speed of social media? Some members of senior leadership in companies maybe are on social media. Some are not. Do you think that is there importance to be on the platform or

at least have a team that understands it, or what are your thoughts on that?

Greg Zimprich: Well, I don't know that it is a requirement for the senior leaders to be on the platforms themselves, but they certainly need to have an understanding. At a minimum need to have a team that is empowered and very knowledgeable, because even brands who don't necessarily play in the social media space are potential victims to a social media crisis. Whether the company or the brand is actively out there engaging or not, they still need to be prepared. I think some senior leaders are really good about understanding that, and even participate in it. And it's the companies I think that are slow to respond, that are bureaucratic, that don't understand the speed of which social media works ... It used to be 24 hours was a long time, now an hour is a long time. I mean, I think there's just a certain expectation that if you're going to play in that space you need to be committed to being an active part of the engagement.

Katie Priebe: If you could name a couple of best practices, in your eyes, of situations that you've been in or things that would for sure be on the list for best practices for dealing with a crisis on social media; what would those be?

Greg Zimprich: Well, I think the first thing is don't do stupid things, you won't get in trouble. That's an over simplification but I mean it does start at that stage. I think if brands are and companies are monitoring, listening, paying attention in the social media space they can avert a lot of trouble for themselves. Because most of the time these things don't just drop out of the sky out of nowhere. They bubble up. There's been studies done. For example, issues that pop up with tech brands often will start in Asia. So there's a bubbling up of a crisis. That's just one example. There are others obviously in other industries but if you're paying attention and truly listening, and watching, and observing, that probably is the most important thing for heading off a crisis early on but just in terms of the best practices for social media I think monitoring digital, monitoring is critically important.

I think having a social media team that's empowered with people like legal, consumer services people, communications folks, marketing folks who are accessible. Who can act quickly. Who have been given, who have been empowered to be able do those things. To write responses and post them. Sometimes it's ... I've seen situations where it's as simple as just like understanding who owns the passwords to get access to a site. It's having thought through and doing some scenario planning so you know what your

vulnerabilities are. You know when you're talking about potential crisis what those we are. How you're going to respond to them. Having statements and positions well thought out. You need them written out and approved. There's a process by which you can actually assign a dollar value to the potential threats of a different scenario. Literally like just thinking through, what are the biggest vulnerabilities and prioritizing them that way. Like I said apply a financial component to those as well. I think those are some of the biggest things.

Then we hear spokes people are going to be, Greg how you going to respond? I need the buy in from senior leadership so if we need to go shoot a quick video with the CEO, we know how we're going to do that. Where we're going to do it. We know if the CEO is on board he's going to be able to do it. We have a good handle on who our detractors are out there. If we're monitoring them as well we know if they're talking about something that got the potential to hit us. I mean those are just a few of the things I would say are some of the best practices.

Katie Priebe: All right, Greg that sounds good. Let's see here. In the aftermath of a crisis, so once things settle down do you have any thoughts on picking up the pieces? Or if the company says, "We're going to fix it." How credible is actually fixing it?

Greg Zimprich: I think there's a couple of things. I think one, picking up the pieces you always, always, always want to debrief. Understand why and what didn't work and then make course corrections. I mean that's like number one most important thing. But I think where you were going, the point about making changes. Social media, the vast majority of the time is a symptom of a disease. There's usually something deeper going on that causes it. In rare instances there are crisis that come out as a result of what a brand or company does on social media. But most of the time it's something that's happening off line in the real world that makes its way to social media.

What I used to do with social media training for General Mills, I would say to the marketers if we're really paying attention, if we're listening to what our consumers and customers are saying, social media really is the gift that keeps on giving. I mean it should make us better at what we do. It should make our products better. It should make us better at dealing with consumers. And it should make us better marketers. Because if you ... you never really have to guess at what consumers are thinking anymore. It's out there. And if you're paying attention you can figure it out pretty quickly. Put the pieces together.

After a crisis, yeah there's a lot of things that need to happen, but averting a crisis with changing some of those things that are underlying cause of a social media crisis is probably where it all starts. So if really bad happens to a company ... Look at Dominoes. They ended up changing a lot of their policies and the way they operate literally on a social media crisis. It made them a better company and a better brand. Unfortunately they paid a pretty heavy price to get there but the idea is to become good at social media without having to go through something like that.

Katie Priebe: No, that makes sense. I'm about to see, what else have I got ... When you were doing your trainings at General Mills what were some key bullet points that you emphasized in those trainings or what were things that the audience really grasped on to? Like yeah, that makes sense, I didn't think about that, or anything just in the crisis social space?

Greg Zimprich: Well, I think it's the same. There's a couple of things. One I used to talk a lot about. It doesn't really matter what the channel is. Don't post something, you know there's a lot of different ways to think about it. Don't post something you wouldn't like your mom to see. Don't say something you wouldn't want to be quoted in the New York Times saying something negative. The difference with social media is when you post something you can actually go and delete it a minute later. It's too late. It's already out there and it's permanent. You have to be super smart and sensitive about what you're doing and what you're saying because it will live on.

There are many case studies about companies and brands doing what they thought was surreptitious. Going into a community and making positive comments about a brand but in this day and age. I think there's a famous one that we used to use in our training. There's a product manager of Honda. And the product that he worked on was not doing well. He would go into these communities and say positive things about this hybrid car, right. Well, it didn't take long for somebody to say, "Wow this is really weird." There's all these negative threads and then this guy jumps in with this really happy positive message. Someone does a screen grab, goes and looks him up on LinkedIn and they find out that he's a project manager for Honda. Someone at Honda had already seen it and told him to take it down, but it was too late. The post disappeared, but someone already did a screen grab. That happens all the time. Used to happen all the time. Brands are better about it now. Social media is absolutely permanent whether you believe it or not.

Then I think one of the rules is if something gives you pause then pause. If you're not sure about something, if you question it, if it doesn't feel right, your gut is almost always right. If you see something about your company or brand or if you are going to do something and you're not so sure about it, just stop and take some time to think about it. I think that is a really, really important thing to think about. Then I think just knowing the proper way to escalate. If you're on social media and you see something about your company or brand, what do you do about it? How do you escalate it? How do you get help? Who do you need to send it to? I think one of the things that General Mills realized we don't necessarily want everybody out there intervening on our behalf. We want the experts to be able to do that. But we do want an army of thousands of eyes and ears who can look for these things and escalate them to the right source. And that is why we created the crisis communication hotline team to literally be able to deal with those kind of things. Which worked really well.

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Greg Zimprich: I mean, I think those are a couple of the key things to really think about. Obviously the same brand equity rules apply in social media, probably even more sensitive. But that would apply to anything in marketing, and advertisement, a PR campaign, a press release. You have to respect the brand and make sure you take good care of it. So I think those are some good things.

Katie Priebe: Well, anything else I missed that you wanted to touch on?

Greg Zimprich: Yeah, I don't think that people always understand how quickly things can get out of control in social media and because social media crisis often don't happen between the nine to five hours of Monday through Friday. It's really important to be vigilant in monitoring 24/7 in this world that we live in. And then just the virality of things getting out of control. And like I said earlier brands can leverage that in a positive way as well. If you have a quick response and its on point and smart that could actually work to your advantage but lot of brands have been bitten by being really slow to respond. Speed is absolutely of the essence with, in the social media space.

Katie Priebe: Last question. Are there any don'ts that you had come across that you definitely would not do?

Greg Zimprich: Well, I think a lot of the issues that I've seen through the years are caused because either junior people or uninitiated untrained people have been given the keys to social media and they've

made really obvious mistakes and errors or they've taken out their frustrations with a post or whatever it may be. There's a bigger picture there when it comes to the brand and the brand equity. And it doesn't take much to cause a lot of damage for the brand standpoint and even the financial standpoint. So that's why I think social media training is really, really important. And just being really aligned with the brand's voice and persona and just guidelines in terms of how you talk for and about that brand. Really, really important. I think that's another one that's kind of ... Maybe sometimes have been overlooked in the past. Maybe less now, but six, eight years ago some of those things were pretty common.

Katie Priebe: Wow, that's good. That makes sense. Anything else? No? What would you like your title to be in this project?

Greg Zimprich: King would be good or like ...

Katie Priebe: King Greg, I feel.

Greg Zimprich: Yeah. That would be good.

Katie Priebe: For real?

Greg Zimprich: No, I'd like it to be king.

Katie Priebe: You want it to be king? Okay, I will.

Greg Zimprich: You're not going to ask me king of what?

Katie Priebe: King of what?

Greg Zimprich: I don't know.

Katie Priebe: What do you want to be the king of?

Greg Zimprich: I don't know. Something. Something good. I don't know. You know, my title is the same as it used to be.

Katie Priebe: Okay.

**Bob McNaney, Senior Vice President of Crisis and Reputation Management
at Padilla**

The interview with Bob McNaney was video taped and conducted via email on Thursday, May 11, 2017. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

BOB MCNANEY (PADILLA) Subject Matter Expert Interview

Part 1 Pre-crisis

Q1: How should companies best plan for a crisis on social?

Bob McNaney: Organizations must understand at the highest levels that a social media crisis is a very real possibility. But they must also understand that social media is one aspect of the crisis management plan. In short, don't be afraid of it-plan for it just as you would a natural disaster, workplace violence or a major recall.

Social media is but one channel (a fast moving channel) but it should be treated like other internal and external communications. I.e. is you communicate quickly and well on social, if you communicate well internally and if you communicate quickly to say, customers you will be effectively responding.

Q2: What are companies doing well?

Bob McNaney: The best organizations include social media experts on their crisis communication team. They recognize the various social channels where their most important stakeholders live (i.e. customers on Twitter). The well-prepared organizations create a version of their messaging for social channels. Again, make sure your media statement can play on Twitter.

Finally, companies which practice social media crisis events tend to perform better while identifying gaps in their preparedness as a result of those drills. Social media simulator exercises are just as important as traditional tabletop exercises. The most successful companies have social media monitoring tools in place and are ready to use them when an issue arises.

Q3: What are companies not doing well?

Bob McNaney: What we see time and time again is making the social media aspect an "add on" to the organization's overall crisis communication strategy. You cannot "prepare" using traditional communication channel-building messaging and not have those messages tailored to social. In short, organizations that minimize social media put themselves at risk and don't fully understand the need for speed during a crisis.

Part 2 During the Crisis

Q1: What are a few strategies that have been used? Did they work?

Bob McNaney: In many cases the “play” has been to monitor social and get a sense of who is really saying what about your organization. By judging who is talking about you, companies can develop a response. The best companies do not have a one size fits all mindset. You have you plan in place but use aspects as need. The last thing a company wants to do is have a relatively low profile on an issue then make it bigger by “over communicating. This sometimes happens in traditional communications too. When you identify a “ringleader” try and reach out to them and take the conversation off line. When you know the “other side” is using social heavily, be ready to do the same IF you are prepared. As an example, during a labor strike a hospital knew its nurses were heavy into social media. So on the day on the contract vote to end the strike, the hospital was tweeting out a constant stream of information about why the contract was a good one.

Q2: Which is easier to manage social influencers or traditional media?

Bob McNaney: Normally traditional influencers (i.e. traditional media) are easier to manage. Neither social nor traditional influences are all that easy to handle, but social tends to be nameless faceless foes-whereas traditional outlets have a higher level of accountability. I.e. it is harder to be a “bully” on TV or newspaper than it is on social.

Q3: Social media policies, how well do they work? Are they used?

Bob McNaney: Most organizations rarely speak to their employees about social media policies outside of the time the employee is hired and when they are actually in a crisis.

During a crisis being played out on social, companies need to remind employees to follow social media policies while also showing respect for one another. I.e. if a building collapses at a manufacturing site, there will be opportunities to share information and pictures on social. The best companies ask their employees to be respectful. In the case of UNITED AIRLINES look at what is being shown and denounce the action immediately. United did not do that.

Q4: How well does senior leadership understand social media and its platforms?

Bob McNaney: As a general rule of thumb (especially in larger global organizations) senior leaders are aware that social media needs to be a significant consideration during a crisis, but few can carry out a strategy or know the tactical ins and outs.

Frankly, when an executive team is operating at its best, each person will bring their expertise to the table-again another reason to always have social media experts “in the room” and on the crisis communication team. In organization who use social a great deal there tends to be a richer understanding of social.

Q5: Which social media platform has the most impact and which needs to be watched most closely?

Bob McNaney: It is my experience that Facebook generates a great deal of what I would call “general discussion”. Twitter is the platform I worry about, as there is a clear link to traditional media outlets. In short Twitter alerts media faster than any other platform...their sources, viewers, listening and readers live on Twitter and feels like the “news feed” of social media.

Q6: How quickly can an issue involving your company go viral? Are companies prepared to respond?

Bob McNaney: The crisis can start almost instantly. Passengers on a plane with a problem-stuck on the ramp can and do jump onto social to discuss their displeasure. If the “airline” in that case doesn’t nip in the bud the social awareness can escalate to a crisis within a matter of hours if not sooner.

Issues tend to blow up they bump up to a traditional news cycle. I.e. United airlines-many people heard about the issue on social, but it was not until the next morning that most people heard of it as a result of mainstream media picking up traditional media reports. If you don’t get some sort of a response in place in the first 30 minutes of learning of an issue you have a growing problem. I would suspect only a quarter of our clients are ready to act fast enough to catch a social crisis issue before it escalates,

Q7: Most memorable social crisis we dealt with.

Bob McNaney: A client had a vendor partner make an insensitive comment to a customer on the phone. The issue escalated from a few hundred comments on social (mostly Facebook) to nearly 100,000 comments within 24 hours. The company tried to contact the person directly and apologize. The company and its crisis communication partner monitored the issue and was able to determine that once the initial 24 hour backlash was over the issue largely died off.

Part 3 Post-Crisis

Q1: What are the effective tools and actions in aftermath?

Bob McNaney: Just as in any aspect of a post crisis, once the dust has settled a full review must be done. What actions were taken, in what timeframe and how were the messages and actions received, We recommend daily reviews if it is a major issue (i.e. United Airlines) let the dust settle but then do a full review once the anger, stress, pain subsides.

Q2: What are the effective strategies to manage after a crisis?

Bob McNaney: The faster you “get back to normal” the faster your brand tends to recover. Get through the crisis and then reach out to your key stakeholders (customers) as you normally did. If you find through the crisis that your customers are more engaged on social than you thought-consider increasing your social presence.

Q3: What are the few strategies, which could be improved upon?

Bob McNaney: Organizations tend to “talk the talk” rather than “walk the walk” after a crisis. They talk about making improvements, doing exercises etc, but few do (until they have another social media issue).

**Amy von Walter, Executive Vice President of Communications and
Customer Care at Toys "R" Us Corporate Headquarters**

The interview with Amy von Walter was conducted over the phone on Monday, May 22, 2017. The interview lasted about 30 minutes. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Amy von Walter: Hi this is Amy.

Katie Priebe: Hi Amy, this is Katie Priebe calling. How are you?

Amy von Walter: I'm good, how are you?

Katie Priebe: Good. Is this still a good time to chat, or did I catch you in something?

Amy von Walter: Nope, it's just fine.

Katie Priebe: Okay, great.

Amy von Walter: How can I be helpful?

Katie Priebe: Yeah, well I appreciate you taking the time. If you remember, I heard you speak in Matt [Furman's 00:00:24] class, and thought you would be a great addition to my capstone project, so I appreciate it.

Amy von Walter: Great, great. No problem.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, so just to give you a little background, I am working on a capstone about crisis and social media response, and I've done quite a bit of research, and looking for articles, and put together a literature review, and then the back end of my project is talking with at least ten subject matter experts, just about crisis and social, mostly from the corporate perspective.

Amy von Walter: Okay.

Katie Priebe: So I'd love to get just a couple of thoughts from you just based on your experience with managing issues, either at Best Buy, or at your current role at Toys "R" Us, so ...

Amy von Walter: Okay.

Katie Priebe: And if you're okay, I'm going to record the conversation, just so that I can go back and transcribe it, and what we'll do is I'll put that into-

Amy von Walter: Sure.

Katie Priebe: ... the paper itself, and it's just for my committee, just so they know we actually did the interview, and that I'll pull some info and nuggets from that, so are you okay with that?

Amy von Walter: Sure, of course.

Katie Priebe: Okay, great. All right. Well I passed on some questions, so I guess if there's anything ... Did you want to go through just, I'll ask a couple of questions and then we'll go from there, or did any certain points you wanted to start on first?

Amy von Walter: Oh, you know what? Let me take a look, I may have had, they may be in my invite here, and I probably haven't even had a chance to look at them. Oh, yeah I vaguely remember, if you just want to go through them, because I don't have them in front of me here.

Katie Priebe: Sure. Yeah, that sounds great. So I kind of bucketed them out by three categories: Pre-Crisis, During the Crisis, and then Post-Crisis. So I'd love to maybe start in the Pre-Crisis area and just the planning stage, and just get your initial thoughts on what you think companies and organizations should do to best plan for a crisis, in general and then specifically dealing with a social media issue.

Amy von Walter: Yeah, I mean in general I think a plan is always great, but the second something happens, usually the plan goes out the window. One of the things I find most beneficial from like a crisis planner document perspective is making sure you have phone numbers, and emails, and home phone numbers, and cell phone numbers.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Amy von Walter: Because I'm always surprised by the number of times when something like that really catches people off guard, and you know, you're out on a Saturday night, without X and you need to call someone, but you realize you don't have their phone number, so those kinds of things can really trip you up in a crisis, so those administrative details are really important to have documented in advance.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. And so-

Amy von Walter: And then ...

Katie Priebe: Go ahead, yeah.

Amy von Walter: And then from a social perspective it's the same kind of issue. It's making sure that you've got phone numbers, and accounts, and passwords, and those types of things, because you may be in a position where you have a couple people working for you, or a whole team of people working for you, but you may be the person in the moment who is having to deal with the immediate execution, which means you need to be able to go in and sign in, and post something to the company social media account. And so having that access, or at least the passwords and those administrative details, again, really important because those are the things that can definitely trip you up and pull you down during those initial minutes.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. So in your-

Amy von Walter: Which is really kind of silly and practical, but it's the reality of the situation.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative), definitely. No, I agree. And so do you recommend, like at your experience at Best Buy, and Toys "R" Us now, do you have, with that large of an organization, do you have like a specific crisis plan that you can implement with those numbers and those level of details? Or what do you recommend?

Amy von Walter: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I have phone numbers put into my cell phone, and I carry around in my ... or I have pictures of phone lists that I can access on my phone if I need to, or in my work bag, I have phone numbers and contact lists, et cetera. So I mean just having that stuff stashed somewhere, in a file somewhere that you can easily access is important, not just in a binder that's going to sit at your desk that you don't have access to.

Katie Priebe: Sure. Definitely. From a planning perspective, what do you think companies are doing well, and what do you think companies are not doing well as it relates to crisis and managing a social media issue?

Amy von Walter: Yeah, I wouldn't say there's companies, I can't really speak for everybody, but holistically I would say certainly I think companies are starting to appreciate the importance and relevance in social

media in a crisis. So for example during 9/11 social media didn't exist, right?

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Amy von Walter: So the types of considerations have changed dramatically. I always use Gabby Giffords' shooting as an example. That was news that broke on Twitter, and so you're seeing more and more news breaking on social media, and so understanding that and then figuring out how do you account for that when you're building out a crisis document is really important. Because in the early days of my career, when we were writing crisis plans, we used to have a one-hour rule. So I was in an airport at the time and the rule was that we would have some sort of media briefing within one hour after, you know, a plane crash or some kind of incident.

These days you can't, and a one-hour rule's no longer acceptable because social media at that point has already reported on the incident in detail. And so understanding that the timelines have changed, how people are getting ... how news organizations and how the public is gathering information is entirely different. And in some cases unfortunately, recently we've seen shootings and other events play out live on Facebook, so understanding how social media has completely turned news and crisis upside down is really, really important, because otherwise you're never going to be able to keep pace and manage the crisis effectively, if you're not prepared for that.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). In your experience do you recommend part of that preparation be draft messaging, or how do you think that we can help plan or prepare for the speed of social media?

Amy von Walter: Yeah, I mean, I don't know that you're ever totally prepared for it, but I think, you know, we do this here and we certainly did it at Best Buy, but we had tabletop exercises, so getting people in a room thinking about what could happen, running scenarios where social media is part of the exercise. So I think doing some of those simulations are really helpful, and then just doing some of that education with your senior level executives is really important as well, because timing is critical now more than ever.

Katie Priebe: Sure. No, I definitely agree. You mentioned tabletop exercises, and that's some of the work that you're doing at Toys "R" Us, but how do you communicate that to your teams? Does Toys "R" Us have a social media policy, or is there some sort of communication about do's and don'ts of social media within your organization that ...

Amy von Walter: Yeah, I think most companies have some basic social media guidelines. A lot of times those are publicly available, [Nordstrom's 00:08:08] would be an example, I'm pretty sure they have those guidelines posted on their website. So there's obviously do's and don'ts that apply I think on any given day, but certainly they're under more scrutiny and may need some sort of adjustment during times of crisis.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Amy von Walter: I mean in a crisis you're going to have to see cell activity, potentially you're going to have to rework messaging that maybe you had planned, I mean, the approach is going to be different, because you have to be sensitive to what's happening in the world. I mean, really, you have to keep in mind social doesn't change. I mean social shouldn't change your messaging, because whether you were doing that in a press release, or in an interview or something else, your messaging would be there, now you just have to incorporate it in a different vehicle, which is social media.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). When you're dealing with an issue or a crisis, do you think that it's important to push out content on social media in the midst of a crisis, or do you recommend taking or trying to take the conversation offline?

Amy von Walter: No, I think social media is, you know, people want to treat it as something ... it's just a different tactic, or a different delivery mechanism. You would still want to engage just as you would with a press release or a press conference, this is just another way to get news out there, but I think you just have to look at it as another distribution vehicle. Certainly the pacing of social media is different, but it's really just another outlet.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. Cool. Let's see, I'm just looking at some of the questions here. Maybe tell me a little bit about your thoughts about senior leadership and their understanding of social media. Do you think that there are any barriers or do you feel like social or senior leadership teams understand and appreciate the speed in a crisis?

Amy von Walter: Yeah, I think it varies probably, from organization to organization, but I think there's greater understanding of social media no question today than there was, you know, five years ago. And certainly I think senior leaders are seeing different companies deal with crisis on social media, so I would say the business community, or the corporate community, the world at large has a

better understanding of social and the potential implications of social, particularly during a crisis or issue.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative), definitely. Okay, and then ...

Amy von Walter: And really, the other thing I'd say on that is, my expectation isn't that the CEO is an expert in social media, it's my job to have the subject matter expertise, and I would give counsel like I would on social media just as I would any other vehicle, whether that would be print, or broadcast or online.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative), definitely. Do you think that there should be social components in tabletop exercises, or do you implement that at Toys "R" Us?

Amy von Walter: Oh, yeah, yeah. No, yeah, absolutely, absolutely.

Katie Priebe: Is there anything, or I guess not necessarily at Toys "R" Us or your current position, but it may be anything in your career that you, any learnings that you've come across when you've been dealing with issues that I guess are not confidential that you're able to share? Any memorable experiences of dealing with an issue or a best practice that you think is really important.

Amy von Walter: Do you mean in social, or just crisis in general?

Katie Priebe: I would say in general, I think in general would be good.

Amy von Walter: Any things in a-

Katie Priebe: Or social, whatever the example is.

Amy von Walter: Yeah. You know, to me it's just being prepared, and like I said, being organized on the front end with some of those administrative things, those are the things that will trip you up every time, so that would be one of my top pieces of advice for people.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. Okay, and looking at the back end of a crisis and the aftermath, what do you think companies should be doing once they're picking up the pieces? Is there any sort of ... this could be in crisis in general, or specific to social media, but just what do you think are best practices in dealing with the aftermath?

Amy von Walter: Well, I always think, doing a debrief after, sort of really taking a ... once you sort of get out of the moment, is just taking time to sit

down with the right, with all the players, and say, "Okay, what went well and what could we do better next time?"

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Amy von Walter: Things aren't perfect, right, particularly in a crisis, and so there's always opportunities for improvements and to learn, and I think that's really important, that you take that continuous learning and apply it to these crisis or issues situations.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. No, I agree. Let's see here. Are there any social platforms that you think are faster than others, or weigh more, I guess, than others? Like is Twitter, for example, when we're dealing with an issue, do you monitor Twitter more closely than Facebook, or not really?

Amy von Walter: No, I mean I would say Facebook and Twitter certainly are probably some of the primary channels, just because that's how they're being, they're most widely trafficked. There's Snapchat, and Instagram and others, but I find that from a issue perspective, not having been through a crisis here recently, Facebook and Twitter tend to be the places where people congregate. Twitter, they're different animals, so Twitter I think you're getting more, you know, it's a faster pace. Facebook is more static, so in some cases comments there can be more damaging because they live there longer, right, in a static way, so I think both channels are important.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. Let's see. I think that's about all for the questions I have. Or, I guess one more.

Amy von Walter: Okay.

Katie Priebe: On the, one more quick one, the future of social media. Is there anything that you think companies and organizations should be planning for or staying ahead of now, of where this platform is going, or where all the platforms are going?

Amy von Walter: You know, I think where they're going is sort of anyone's guess. I think the reality is they're here and they're not going to go away, so I think companies who recognize that and figure out how to leverage those channels in a way that makes sense for their brands is important. And I think just having people who are paying attention to the next platform and what's next, and just staying on top of this continuously evolving space is important for communicators to be successful.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. Good. No, this is really helpful. Is there anything I missed that you wanted to touch on around this topic?

Amy von Walter: I don't think so.

Katie Priebe: Okay. Perfect. Okay, well this was great. I appreciate your time, I know you're so busy, so I appreciate the ...

Amy von Walter: No problem. Good luck.

Katie Priebe: ... taking a couple of minutes, so ... And I was able to, I chatted with Bob, actually I let him know, Bob [McNaney 00:15:41], that I'd be coming on this call, so he says hello.

Amy von Walter: Oh, good. Oh great.

Katie Priebe: He said he's going to call you at some point. He's like, "I need to touch base with her."

Amy von Walter: I know, it's been a million years, definitely.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. So ...

Amy von Walter: Okay, thanks so much. And good luck with your project.

Katie Priebe: All right, thank you, I appreciate it.

Amy von Walter: Okay.

Katie Priebe: Bye-bye.

Amy von Walter: Bye.

Curtis Smith, Director of Marketing at The Nerdery

The interview with Curtis Smith was conducted in-person on Thursday, June 1, 2017. The interview lasted about one hour. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

- Katie Priebe: Let's see if I can get this to work ... Okay, perfect. All right and then for your title, what would you like your title to be?
- Curtis Smith: Director of Marketing at the Nerdery.
- Katie Priebe: Okay, perfect.
- Curtis Smith: So my background is, early on in my career, mostly for Weber Shandwick and Freshman-Hilliard at a junior level, helping with crisis communication across various client accounts. Some, with the actual agency organizations when crisis would fall on them. Certainly had view and work into crisis communications with companies like Carmichael, Lynch, Spong and Periscope. Right now, my experience with crisis is within the marketing department and advising the executive leadership team at the Nerdy. We've only had two major crises in my two years with them, but some of it counsel, some of it was actually writing the communications, some of it was bringing in senior counsel, so they could handle it.
- Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative), So, what do you think are some best practices or tips you think companies should understand and remember when managing a crisis, and for this, specifically, I've kinda bucketed it out into a pre-crisis, like the planning stage, during the crisis, and then aftermath. So, if we wanna start maybe with the planning stage ... What are some best practices that you think companies should keep in mind in planning?
- Curtis Smith: I think planning's pretty basic, I mean, and to be honest with you, I even think some of the planning that happened twenty years ago?
- Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)
- Curtis Smith: Same type of processing, type of outline, that can be used today. Everything is happening much faster, and that's just probably the digital age side of it. Twenty-four hour news is a big part of that and I think that twenty-four hour news starting nearly thirty years ago with CNN...
- Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Curtis Smith: That was a transition, and that got us ready for the digital age, I think some people missed that.

"Oh no, it's just the digital age, that's why it's so fast"- no! We got journalists sitting around on their hands, waiting for some sort of story, they're gonna dig something up, so I think that's how that, really, was the precursor to the digital age.

Going into the planning side of it, I really think probably the biggest thing, at least for organizations, whether it be someone internally doing crisis communications for an organization or being pulled in as a consultant is dealing with senior management. That's not talked about as much. Sure, journalism, or journalists, in general news facets ... Very important area, but if you give them a story, or give them the facts in a way that best puts you in the best light, that's fine. Senior leadership have a different opinion, viewpoint, stance, on what's happening with an organization. They not only have the most vested in that organization, they're very passionate about that organization, they have to be, to be within that senior leadership group. That's really the group that you have to coach, and you have to lead them the way to, not only what's right for their organization, which isn't hard to convince them on that ...

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Curtis Smith: But what's ethical.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Curtis Smith: What's truthful, and just the best all-around approach.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative), so, when thinking about senior leadership and crisis experts giving that counsel to them, what are some recommendations that you have specifically on, managing groups of people ...

Curtis Smith: Yeah.

Katie Priebe: Before you even start managing a crisis?

Curtis Smith: Yeah ... And it's tough not having a specific crisis in mind and usually through the planning stage I will use an example of when an organization got burned in the last couple months. That's helpful, that helps them put their mindset where this could potentially go. And the way that you need to coach those senior

leaders, is to make sure that ... They understand the viewpoint of the other audiences, whether it be the journalists trying to get the story, trying to be very specific on ... They're not out to protect you. And as soon as they understand that, "Oh, all right, so someone's coming after me?", yeah a little bit, and if you have that mindset, that'll help them understand that stake hold, whether it be the actual community they're dealing with or the end-user ...

Katie Priebe: Right.

Curtis Smith: For lack of a better term, putting them in that perspective is good as well.

Katie Priebe: So, when I was diving into my introduction last night in my research paper, and I've compiled a bunch of literature, and research, and reviews, and it's interesting, 'cause, I'm finding that there's a lot of research on crisis management, and then there's a lot of research on social media, but I'm not finding a lot ... There's a gap between combining the two and truly understanding how those two platforms come together, those two ... So, any thoughts on, do you agree with that? Is there a gap in research and expertise around this?

Curtis Smith: I think there probably is. The problem is, is that it's all the same, you know? Good practices, no matter what channel, work well, and that's through the base of the communications. Now, don't get me wrong, I think there are some specific things around social media and digital communications, that can vary, and I think it's more on the approach. It may be more of the audience, and you can get into the millennial talk if you want to, however, who's after the millennials? Who's ... How are we gonna best communicate with each other? So, I think there's a sub-sector, that could certainly have more research, definitely more [inaudible 00:06:09] leadership around it, 'cause I haven't seen a lot myself ... But, when I was reading your questions, I got to "Hey, no, it doesn't matter what channel, as long as your message is on point".

A great crisis communications professional in town, she works over at [inaudible 00:06:26] or whatever [inaudible 00:06:27]'s calling themselves this week, Jill Schmidt, she comes from a corporate background. She used to always say, "You're delivering the exact same message. You might be amplifying different parts of it, to be more specific to a stakeholder's set, but it's the same message". And I always, early on in my career said, that makes sense to me rather than trying to build different messages around [crosstalk 00:06:48]. Because, channels are so important, and a social media channel being probably more transparent than any

other channels, you could lose various messages in the same channel, so.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative), right, no I agree, yeah, having those consistent messages. So, maybe the thought is to understand, and appreciate, and teach the best practices of crisis management, and it doesn't matter if it's social media, or if it's your board of directors, or it's your internal employees, it should be all consistent message tweaked a little bit for the audience.

Curtis Smith: Very much so, and I think on the tactical level, how you execute, and what you're seeing today, you're actually seeing that with the President quite a bit. What he says on Twitter, is what he says on Twitter. Even the other night was, whatever goofy tweet that meant, or what it was, it was never taken down, I think it's 'cause he fell asleep.

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Curtis Smith: But, I mean, it was what it was. That was his stance on whatever that was, or anything else that's coming across. I'm sure on the Paris Accord that will be today, he will have a tweet, probably later tonight, on his opinion on how that rolled out.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Curtis Smith: Great! That's documented opinion, no journalist can change what he's saying there, so there's a good example of how a tactical execution of social media is delivering the message ... How many crisis communications or media relations programs have you been where an executive's sitting there saying four different things in one sentence?

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Curtis Smith: You can't do that with social media ...

Katie Priebe: You can't.

Curtis Smith: It's stake holding. Now, you have to make sure you do it right the first time, but ...

Katie Priebe: Right.

Curtis Smith: That's a good example of the difference.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, no, definitely. Let's see, was there anything, when you were looking through the questions, anything that stood out to you, in the actual, during the crisis stage ...

Curtis Smith: Sure.

Katie Priebe: Anything, that ... Let me see, look at my questions, sorry, I haven't looked at these in like a day.

Curtis Smith: I think social policy is somewhat interesting ...

Katie Priebe: Okay, yeah.

Curtis Smith: And I sorta chuckled when I saw social media policy, because I remember ten years ago we were all putting together social media policy, and it was about as thick as, well, I can say it's about as thick as War and Peace, or I can say it's about ten megabyte word file, however you look at it, and it was a joke. No one could even totally digest that document, let alone understand what our policy was, and I think they've become a lot more simplistic, a lot more concise, which is really important. However, how employees should act, I think has been changed not by a company but by culture, and there's been individual experiences but also some great public experiences where people have fallen down. So as far as policy, social media usage, all that stuff, that certainly plays a good base of what happens, but how your plan executes ... Make sure those primary channels are in your control.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Curtis Smith: That's another thing, and it's those little differences, hey, back in the day, I could control a press release, I could have some sort of control on an executive doing an interview for whatever channel. However, I could not control personal Twitter handles today, and that has to be part of your plan. Generally, I like to go silent, to not do anything on your personal Twitter, I don't care if it's a picture of your kid. Stick to the organization's Twitter handle, but that's just one small example.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. But sounds like you still think ... Policies are effective today, that companies should still have policies.

Curtis Smith: Very much so, but they have to be concise. It cannot be legal leaders, [inaudible 00:10:53] will absolutely kill it and drown the message on what everyone's supposed to do or what, or at least what rules of thumb and policy they need to follow.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). There was one expert, or one person I talked to, that said "I don't know if I believe in a social media crisis", like if a social media crisis is a real thing or if the crisis origin is actually, you know, happening elsewhere in real life and social media is just a traffic of information. Do you agree with that, or do you disagree with that?

Curtis Smith: I do disagree. What it comes down to is, there can be a social media-based crisis. Generally, it's gonna be some sort of screw-up within that platform, by the organization and that happens quite a bit. I think great examples of that are different examples of organizations taking advantage of, for lack of a better term, real-life stories, and trying to get their brand into a conversation when they have no business being there whatsoever, and I'm sorry, General Mills said something about Prince when he died ... Me, from Minnesota, I appreciate that, because I know everybody in General Mills, at least within their Communications department have lived in Minnesota for a long time, they love Prince, and that did hit our state really hard.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Curtis Smith: No one else outside of Minnesota understands that and they're really bashed quite a bit. A perfect example of a social media crisis that caused a stir internal and outside of General Mills. And it's a social media crisis, and that plays out in the real world, whether it be with consumer decisions on whether to buy a product or not, corporate social responsibility programs that may not look like they're as unique or transparent as they should be. You know, I'm just giving some examples, but, I'd have to disagree with that. I would be curious ... I'm at an interesting point in business today, because I'm not a baby boomer, I'm not an older Gen X.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Curtis Smith: Certainly not a millennial.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Curtis Smith: But I grew up partially with this stuff, and I had to learn a lot, too, compared to a big group that grew up with it from day one, and some people that just haven't even learned it. You know, so, I think that perspective probably brings a little bit of old school that, I have to [inaudible 00:13:26] when dealing with things like social media or digital communications, so, yeah, I don't agree with that at all.

Katie Priebe: That's an interesting ... And I agree, I don't agree with that at all either, but I think your point is really interesting, is when we speak with and communicate with senior leadership teams as counselor for example, to understand those generational differences with social media. 'Cause that's ... A millennial, I may go in and speak to a baby boomer about how do you not understand the speed of social media? Well, they may not understand it because they've never been on the platform, they don't really understand how that works, so how do you kinda bridge that gap and find a way to communicate?

Curtis Smith: Right.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. No, that's interesting. Yeah, I agree with you that the ... There's no such thing as ... That there is a social media crisis, for sure. And there was a couple, even like the United issue for example, that didn't necessarily start on social media, the incident happened on the plane, but it became a huge issue because of social media.

Curtis Smith: Yes. Yes, very much so, there is the visual of it. And I think that's another thing that people don't understand, that no matter how hard traditional journalists try, they will not get things up faster than social media. They'll have more credibility, they'll have more followers and certainly a mass audience, but they won't be faster. And, I mean it's always about being faster than their competitors, and they can worry about that, but I don't know, I think that's interesting.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). No, definitely. Let's see, any thoughts on best practices ... Well, two questions. What we talked about with speed, how quick do you think the organizations need to be ready to react?

Curtis Smith: Instantaneously. I tell you what, that's tough, and that's something I learned from [inaudible 00:15:30]. I can say something to a journalist. I can say nothing to a journalist. I should say something, but say nothing to a journalist, in the sense that, hey, we're researching the incident, we don't have all the facts right now, we'll know something soon, and I'll get back to you. I can deliver that message up to three to four hours, even, within this fast environment, and I have commented, and they will use that comment, which is great. That means, we're taking it seriously, we're trying to find out all the facts, and we'll get back to people as soon as possible. That's an amazing thing.

Well, my kids run up to me and ask me for something, and I know that my wife's probably not gonna want to, or ... I'll say, "Your mom and I have to discuss". Now, I don't say "I'll check with Mommy". 'Cause then I lose all power whatsoever. But I'll say, "Your mom and I will have to discuss it". It is a mutual decision by two people within the organization and your mom is not available right now. I mean, that conversation's very interesting. As simplistic as it is, I'm giving them a clear answer, they'll have more information later, after more research is done, more discussion is had, but I don't know, organizations don't want to do that, they want to defend.

And that comes from that senior leadership, that has all the stake in the game, that has all the passion for the organization. Just lashing out. That's been the hardest thing as a communications professional, whether it's a crisis or not, I've had to deal with ... I am the first one, someone strikes out at me, I'll be the first one to lash out at them. And that's a horrible position to have in communications, as you know. Taking that time to craft a response in a very quick way is very important, but it has to be instantaneous.

Katie Priebe: Right. No, I agree. And then, aftermath of the crisis. Are there some best practices that you recommend, to ... You know, some companies will just say, "Okay, we got through this, we're out of the news cycle, we've made a couple of Band-Aid changes, now what?" And, what would you recommend?

Curtis Smith: After the crisis can get really tough, because your organization is gonna change depending on the level of the crisis. I think being able to admit a problem, apologize ... Apology, that's a gray area, but I do say apologize ... And then, communicate how you're gonna do it differently going forward is very important in any crisis. That's a good outline for where your message is gonna come from. Having a consistent message throughout and afterwards is really important, too, and I wrote a little bit about this. There'll be journalists that come back a month later and try and dig to see if you've changed. Great, have that message ready. Have it connected to your previous message. And that's a great practice. I think where you fall down is where someone wants to take that crisis or that message or how things have changed and benefit from it ... That's a tough road to go down because you'll look like you're opportunistic, you may not look as genuine, I'm trying to think of a good example but I can't.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, no, I know what you mean.

Curtis Smith: You know, saying, "hey, we changed, look at us, we're great". No, that's not the way you should do it. I do think there's various other pitfalls as well. Not staying in touch with the contacts you made throughout, whether it's in [inaudible 00:19:02], whether it's within the community field, whether it's in any type of [inaudible 00:19:07], keeping with those contacts, making sure that you're ... Probably not connecting with them with a new message, that's not what I'm saying, but keeping those relationships going. Very central. 'Cause if you didn't have them beforehand, now you do, and don't lose them.

Katie Priebe: Perfect. Good, anything else I missed that you wanted to touch on?

Curtis Smith: I don't think so, no, I think it's a very interesting topic, I think the fact that social media linked to crisis management hasn't been talked about all that much is really weird. There's certain things that ... And given the fact that there are social media crises, I mean, wow.

**Brian Ellis, Executive Vice President of Crisis and Reputation Management
at Padilla**

The interview with Brian Ellis was conducted over the phone on Wednesday, May 31, 2017. The interview lasted about thirty minutes. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Katie Priebe: Katie, how are you?

Brian Ellis: Hey, Katie. How are you? I'm good. You?

Katie Priebe: Good. How's your day going?

Brian Ellis: Pretty good. I have no complaints.

Katie Priebe: Good.

Brian Ellis: No complaints. I'm a little ... [crosstalk 00:00:13].

Katie Priebe: Good. Is this still a good time to chat for a couple minutes?

Brian Ellis: Yeah it is.

Katie Priebe: Okay.

Brian Ellis: Let's go for it.

Katie Priebe: Perfect.

Brian Ellis: If you don't mind me chewing on a salad at the same time.

Katie Priebe: No. That's great. Sounds good. I just finished lunch too. Bob was great and ordered us Jimmy Johns. That was nice.

Brian Ellis: I had a couple unexpected client calls that took over my lunch time.

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Brian Ellis: How's it going?

Katie Priebe: Good. It's going well. Thanks for helping out with my project.

Brian Ellis: No problem.

Katie Priebe: Just to kind of give you a check in of where I'm at, I'm working on the literature review. We have to do research and the lit review for my capstone, and then I'm about halfway through the subject matter expert interviews. At the end I'll probably have 11 or 12 expert interviews.

Brian Ellis: Wow.

Katie Priebe: At the end. It's due at the end of June, so I'm coming along nicely. I appreciate your help with this. I thought what we could do ...

Brian Ellis: Take what time you need to get it done. Don't kill yourself over it.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. No. I appreciate that.

Brian Ellis: [crosstalk 00:01:11].

Katie Priebe: Yeah. This will be a big week this weekend. I'm going to do a bunch on it. It'll be good. What I thought today is, if we could just go through a couple of questions, and if you're okay I'll record your answers.

Brian Ellis: Absolutely.

Katie Priebe: What I'll do from there is transcribe everything, and then it'll be included in the packet of my final capstone.

Brian Ellis: Got you. Okay.

Katie Priebe: If you're good with that ... Let me just make sure this is set up. Okay. As you know, my topic is crisis in social media. I've been focusing in on three separate areas when I've been talking with experts, talking about pre-crisis and the planning stage, and then during the crisis, and then aftermath. I thought we could start with just maybe one or two questions in there. In your opinion ... I know we've had lots of conversations about this, but for the sake of the capstone, in your opinion, what is some of the best strategies or necessity items that need to take place to plan for a crisis on social media, or conversations that need to happen in the planning stage?

Brian Ellis: Yeah. I think it gets back to, Katie, what you and I talked about in terms of, you've really got to be ready for the crisis before it strikes. You have to do a really good job of risk analysis for your organization, and really understand the primary threats that you face. That are ... had the potential to go social. Most people can

get pretty far along in that effort and come up with most of the issues. Don't get me wrong. You may not get every single one of them, but you're going to be in much better shape if you've done the work.

Once you've identified the threats, it's really a matter of defining what your messaging is, and being ready, literally the moment it strikes, with some messaging that can immediately go out. You can engage at any point in time you want to, from minute two on. Now, I'm not saying you have to start communicating at minute two, but you have what you need to do it. Then the next piece is ... First is really preparation, making sure that you're ready. You already have everything blessed, everything approved. The second part of that is really understanding how the social discussion evolves in terms of a response methodology. Think about something that happened. What was the actress that did the Donald Trump thing recently?

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Brian Ellis: Cathy something.

Katie Priebe: Cathy Griffith.

Brian Ellis: Cathy Griffith. She puts this thing out there, and obviously under anticipated what people would do and say and how they'd respond. There's a process that I think you can go through and really understand what's going on. Clearly, she offend people. She's got to show compassion. She's got to then show action in terms of what she's done. Then she's going to have to go back and show compassion again for the people she's hurt, damaged, and everything else, and maybe kind of explain what she was thinking. You know what I mean? If you look at that conversation in terms of what's going on, you can start to plot out, "Here's what I'm going to do in the beginning. Here's what I'm going to do at this stage. Here's what I'm going to do at this stage," and really start thinking through how you would response if this scenario took place. All of that's done before it ever happens.

Katie Priebe: Do you think companies do ... Go ahead.

Brian Ellis: No. They don't do this at all.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. What's holding companies back, in your opinion, from this preparation moment?

Brian Ellis: I don't think they're thinking at this level. I think they recognize the threat, but they still don't recognize the rhythm that the media has and what it takes to make it happen. They're still of the belief that, "I really can't do this until it happens, because we don't know what's going to happen." I'm of the opinion, you don't need to know the details. You just need to know the bigger picture. The details are just details. Those are easy to modify. It doesn't really change the answer.

Take Cathy's example. You know you're going to have to show compassion. Okay? You already know that. What does that compassion look like and say? Don't know, really, but it's going to say, "I'm sorry." That you do know. Because that's the compassion you're going to show, or you're going to thank somebody. You can fill in the other details when it happens, but you know you're going to say you're sorry. So let's go ahead and get that ready. You'll always have to modify it slightly, but that's a two minute exercise. That's not a ten minute discussion, think through, everything else. Get it blessed. All of this has to be pre-blessed before it goes. The preparation is paramount in terms of getting ready.

The other piece is training your people to know when to respond and when to listen, and understanding what's the real strategy of social for me. First, you should be in the listening mode. What are people saying? What are they doing? All that kind of stuff. Where are the trigger points? What is it that has emotionally connected with them that they're actually out there talking about?

Katie Priebe: Sure.

Brian Ellis: You need to identify those themes. Then you need to respond to those themes. Hopefully, you've pre-thought these out. When Cathy kicked it out, she already knew it was going to piss off the government, because she said so. She already knew it. "We're going to get arrested. We're going to have to move to Mexico." She knew it was going to piss some people off. You know it is. All right, now envision it's everybody. You piss off everybody. Now what are you going to do? You're going to anticipate all this stuff. Now we're talking degree here. That's the trigger. At what point in time do I have to apologize, because we clearly missed it.
[crosstalk 00:07:20]

Katie Priebe: At what point in time ... In her case, at what point in time do you think it went past just, "I'm a comedian who makes vulgar jokes," into the court of public opinion realm?

Brian Ellis: I think her time was before she shot the video. She should have been thinking this through.

Katie Priebe: Sure.

Brian Ellis: She thought she was a celebrity and could get away with it. You know what I mean?

Katie Priebe: Yeah. I agree.

Brian Ellis: She discovered quickly that she couldn't. She wasn't really monitoring social, which is the other piece that you got to be doing, and watching the conversation. She could have apologized in the first three hours, and it would not have turned into what it did turn into.

Katie Priebe: Sure. Yeah. CNN has let her go too. I thought that that just came down, too.

Brian Ellis: Today? They let her go today?

Katie Priebe: Yeah. They said, "We're ... "

Brian Ellis: [crosstalk 00:08:10] talking about this morning.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. That's interesting. From a corporate perspective, do you think that there is a disconnect between preparation or crisis preparedness and social media, and the impact that it may have on the bottom line for the company? Do you think that ...

Brian Ellis: Say that one more time.

Katie Priebe: ... there's a disconnect with senior leadership in that?

Brian Ellis: I still don't think senior, senior leadership really understands the impact social media can have on a company, because I'm not sure they've really experienced it yet, most organizations haven't. I think those that are socially savvy, like now the Uniteds of the world, they get it. They understand, but the vast majority of organizations don't. To be frank, some of them, it's not as much of a threat as it is for others. For a B to B company that makes plumbing parts, it's not that big a deal. It's not that much of a risk, not that much of a threat. But to consumer facing organizations, whether you provide a service, a product, or whatever else, it is important, and to government entities it's important, to non-profits,

it's important. They need to pay more attention to it, and they need to recognize the risks and the potentials that it has.

You have to recognize, there's benefits and detriments to everything. Everything has one of each. Recognizing that the value that social media brings to the table ... Because it's a great gatherer of intelligence in terms of what people are thinking, what they're saying, where they're going mentally with this issue. Because they're out there sharing it and other people are responding. It's a great tool to be able to see how the conversation is evolving and giving you the insights you need to be able to ... in real time, the insights you need to be able to tweak, adjust, and modify your strategic approach. The other good thing is, you can now see whether or not your messaging that you're saying is playing or not, by tracking social.

Katie Priebe: Definitely.

Brian Ellis: Having all of that in place and ready, that gets back to that preparation piece, is very, very important. Then the other piece is really having your influencers identified ahead of time, because they could be either a trigger point for you ... If I know that Fred Johnson is a significant influencer in this category, and he comes out opposed to me, I'm going to have problems. That's a trigger point for me. That could prompt five other actions.

Katie Priebe: Right. Doing that homework beforehand.

Brian Ellis: Doing that homework ahead of time is very, very helpful to really help guide some of your responses and your reactions that you're really looking for. Trust me, in many of the cases, you can do it now. You don't need to wait for the event. I think companies are learning that the hard way.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. I agree.

Brian Ellis: The citizen journalist is what's driving it.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. No. That's interesting.

Brian Ellis: We got reporters on ... hundreds of reporters on every single airplane.

Katie Priebe: Right.

Brian Ellis: Hundreds of reporters sitting in the interstate, on the road. Everywhere you go there's hundreds of them. All of them willing to shoot and share.

Katie Priebe: Right. No. That's true. I agree. Do you think that companies completely understand the concept of speed on social media? Do you think they truly understand that window and the most important timeframes of responding?

Brian Ellis: I think some do. I think the vast majority do not. I think what they fail to recognize is really understanding the concept of controlling the direction of the story. Other words, here's the classic example that I use, Katie, when I'm training people. I want you to imagine you're in a room with you and your worst enemy, somebody who clearly doesn't like you, would not hesitate to say really bad things about you. I'm going to give that person 20 minutes to say whatever they want to say about you to millions of people. Are you going to choose to sit there and watch and let her do it or him do it, or are you going to try and respond when it starts? When it's personal, everyone say, "Well, we're going to go right away."

Then why is it different? They don't get it. They just don't make that connection. Understanding that and particularly in the social channels, you have the opportunity to influence the conversation and move the conversation in a direction that can benefit you or it's just the other way around. But you have to anticipate it. You have to know where the conversation's going to go, which gets back to the whole pre-planning piece. If I know where they're going to go, I can then figure out how I'm going to bring it back [crosstalk 00:13:44] that I'm going to make.

Katie Priebe: What are some tactics that you think that are good for that? Taking the conversation offline or what would you recommend ...

Brian Ellis: Absolutely. Yeah.

Katie Priebe: ... to move the conversation?

Brian Ellis: Yeah. Some of it is taking the conversation offline. Some of it is moving that conversation to a dark site where we can provide more in-depth information and get it off of all these other thousands of channels out there. In other words, can I concentrate the conversation in one location that I totally control, that I can also, while I'm there, provide other information that can influence their perspective and their perceptions to better see my side of the story? Then at later date, I can take it down, and it's not sitting out there the entire time. Dark sites are very powerful in that respect. I

think having digital tools ... When I talk about that, I mean short little video vignettes, visual graphics that are shareable, which you'll find if you really go in and you watch and you track. Most of the social activity is somebody sharing something else. Let's give them something to share.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. No. I agree. Is there a way that you think ... or a best practice or two that ... or maybe an example that comes to mind of a way to leverage social media from ... instead of trying to take the conversation offline or to a dark site, those are one way, based on the conversation, do you think there's a chance or an example that you want the conversation to stay on social?

Brian Ellis: Yeah. I'm sure there's always circumstances where a more diverse conversation ... or you can't move it off. Let's just say you can't. You're not very successful at doing it. Your organization can't build a dark site in time or you don't have one ready to go. I'm going to assume those kinds of situations. I think it's not bad that it's out there and that the conversation is there. The challenge is, is how do you direct the conversation with the key players so that the bulk of the influence of that conversation is moving in a direction you want to. Take that kind of scenario, what I want to do then is segment the discussion and conversation. There's some people that you're never going to make happy. They're professional piss and moaners. That's what they do. The social channel's a perfect platform for them. You're never going to change their opinions. Don't even bother with them.

Then you have the influencers, those that are influential in your category in your industry, which you need to neutralize or bring to your side, one or the other. That's really what [crosstalk 00:16:34].

Katie Priebe: They should be identified early to your point earlier.

Brian Ellis: Yeah. They should have known them already. You should have information especially to them. Because if you can influence those guys, you're going to quiet this thing down faster. The other thing I think is, we seem to be of the opinion ... This is a flaw of communicators. We seem to be of this flaw that we have to be out there aggressively communicating in social channels. I'm not necessarily a advocate of that regardless of what's going on. I think you have to monitor the situation and recognize that every time you comment, you keep the conversation alive. Being smart when you comment is really important. This idea that, "Well, they said something. We have to respond," no. You don't.

Katie Priebe: You don't. Yeah.

Brian Ellis: You don't have to. It's kind of like, Bob and I have been talking about President Trump. You don't have to respond to the President. There's no requirement. Knowing that if you respond, you're just going to spike it again.

Katie Priebe: Right. [crosstalk 00:17:39] with the algorithms [crosstalk 00:17:41].

Brian Ellis: Sit back. Wait and watch. Right. Exactly. Let's sit back, wait, and watch. See what happens. We got plenty of time. Nobody says I got to respond to their callous comment within 30 seconds, not even within 30 minutes. The vast majority of people don't really care.

Katie Priebe: Right. No. I agree. There have been a couple of discussion that I've had with some people who have said, and I'd love to get your thoughts on this, that have said that there's really no such thing as a social media crisis. They've said that the crisis itself, at its core, is maybe a business issue or something that has happened onsite, and social media is a traffic or a flow or a powerful medium to spread that information. Do you agree with that or do you disagree with that?

Brian Ellis: Well, I think it all depends on your definitions. I would argue that United would argue that's not true. Because that was a social media event. That never would have happened in a television station without that video. The crisis never would have happened unless it had spread the way it did in social channels. That's what created the event, so to speak. Now, it quickly evolved from just a social event to a traditional media event too, but as some are seeing it, social is just one more channel. That's all it is.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. I agree.

Brian Ellis: It's no different than any other channel. I think the question is where does it get ignited? Is there a media ... Does the media cause a crisis? Yeah. The media does cause crisis. They're the ones that reveal the news. The actions of the individuals are the cause of the crisis. You know what I mean?

Katie Priebe: Right.

Brian Ellis: You won't have, in any of these things ... I would fathom, you don't really have a crisis if it only happens in one channel. You have a potential crisis, because it can quickly spread. But you don't really have a crisis until it expands beyond one channel.

Katie Priebe: Right.

Brian Ellis: If it's just in social, you got a little issue you got to deal with.

Katie Priebe: But it's not a crisis with just one, but it has the potential, like you said.

Brian Ellis: Well, let's go back and look at some of the case studies. What about Uber? Everybody dropped them online. It was the online traffic that prompted all that. They all picked it up because ... You know what I mean? It became a multi-channel, but was it a crisis before everybody picked it up? I don't know. You could argue it was. I guess the answer to that question, does it really matter?

Katie Priebe: Yeah. No. I agree. Yeah. No. That's good. I totally agree.

Brian Ellis: A crisis is a crisis.

Katie Priebe: Exactly.

Brian Ellis: I don't care where they are.

Katie Priebe: That's true. That's good. Good. This was really helpful. Is there anything else that I missed that you wanted to touch on?

Brian Ellis: I think the main thing I would ... Again, I can try and go in and pull some numbers. I don't know. I haven't done it lately. You asked the question about, do companies really get the social. The answer to that is no they don't. You see it because they don't drill it. They don't do the exercises in the social space. They don't practice in social space. That's a significant flaw, because that's where it all starts. Most issues are starting now in the social channels. That's where you really know whether you have something or not.

Katie Priebe: Right.

Brian Ellis: Whether it's sticking. That's where you find out. The New York Times runs a scathing article on your organization, if it's not drawing any social attention or social conversation, it's not an issue, unless your phones are lighting up and customers are saying, "Screw you. I'm not going to do business with you." I think the other piece that we have to always remember as communicators is, we always have to keep driving this back to the business. While there may be a long ongoing conversation on social, if there's no impact to the business, do you really need to

participate? Just because it's there doesn't mean you, again, you have to engage.

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Brian Ellis: There has to be real business reasons why you need to engage.

Katie Priebe: Why you need to engage. Yeah.

Brian Ellis: Participate.

Katie Priebe: It goes back to your point on monitoring. It's good to know what's there and monitor ...

Brian Ellis: Absolutely. Yeah.

Katie Priebe: ... then you can make the call.

Brian Ellis: It's good to know what's happening.

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Brian Ellis: Yeah. To be a little more judicious and choosing when to respond and when to let it go. That's the other aspect. It's hard ... Social requires that you have a thick skin. Every issue does, but social definitely. Because people ... There's a totally new level of condemnation that takes place on social, that you don't see in traditional channels.

Katie Priebe: Right.

Brian Ellis: You don't see it in media reporting. You don't see it live reporting or none of that.

Katie Priebe: I agree. Good. That sounds good.

Brian Ellis: Did I help?

Katie Priebe: Yeah. That was very helpful. That's great.

Brian Ellis: Cool.

Katie Priebe: I'll transcribe everything and I'll keep you posted the next couple weeks ...

Brian Ellis: Sounds good.

Katie Priebe: ... as I continue to button up and finish this thing off. It'll be good.

Brian Ellis: Good. [crosstalk 00:23:10]

Katie Priebe: My goal is at the end to hopefully put together a Padilla branded deck that we can hopefully pull slides from or use where it makes sense, just on some of the research.

Brian Ellis: I would say, let's have a ... Yeah. Let's have a team conversation about this.

Katie Priebe: Okay.

Brian Ellis: Once you've got it done let's ... Because we're really talking philosophy here. What's our approach? What's our methodology? And coming up with the way we approach these kinds of things.

Katie Priebe: Right. No. Definitely. That would be great. Yeah.

Brian Ellis: Cool.

Katie Priebe: As I finish up, that'd be great. Let's do that.

Brian Ellis: Amen.

Katie Priebe: Good. Well thanks, Brian. I appreciate it. This is really helpful.

Brian Ellis: Good. I'm glad. If you have any more questions feel free to call.

Katie Priebe: I will. Definitely. That sounds good.

Bill Coletti, CEO of Kith Corporation, Former Executive Vice President and Global Co-Lead of Crisis and Issues Management at Hill + Knowlton

The interview with Bill Coletti was conducted over the phone on Wednesday, June 7, 2017. The interview lasted about thirty minutes. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Bill Coletti: Outstanding, and yourself?

Katie Priebe: Good. Doing well. Thanks for taking time to chat with me today. Is this still a good time for you?

Bill Coletti: Yeah. It's works out just fine.

Katie Priebe: Good. Good. Well, I know you're busy, so I appreciate it. Well, thanks for responding to my email. I got your name from Jerrod, and was able to work with him at a New York PRSA event a couple months ago, and he recommended you as someone to interview for my capstone project, so that's how your name came about.

Bill Coletti: Good. Very good.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. Well just to give you some background on what I'm working on, I'm a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. I'm also working full time at a PR agency in Minneapolis. Working on my Capstone right now. That will be completed at the end of June. So it's focusing on crisis management and social media. So I've developed a research question, and have been interviewing about 10 to 12 subject matter experts in the industry, just about their experience managing a crisis on social, and best practices in general.

So that's what I'm really focusing on for my project, so I thought you would be a great person to interview.

Bill Coletti: Terrific.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. Why don't we ... If you're okay, what I'm going to do is record our conversation, if you're okay with that.

Bill Coletti: Sure.

Katie Priebe: And what I'll do is transcribe that conversation, and I have to include it in the report, but it will just be for my Capstone committee, which is made of three members of the University of Minnesota faculty. So are you okay with that?

Bill Coletti: Yeah. That's fine.

Katie Priebe: Perfect. Okay. Well, if you could start. I'd love to learn just a little bit more about you and your background, and some of your expertise in crisis, if you wanted to start there.

Bill Coletti: Sure. So I ran the global crisis and risk management practice for Hill & Knowlton, and had a portfolio of about 150 global communicators. My main ... I was the co-leader of the practice, and my main areas were Asia, North America, and South America. And been doing that probably since 2000. Prior to 2000, I ran political campaigns, internationally as well as domestically, for senate, governor, and then ballot initiatives across the country, and then parliamentary elections in Romania, Poland, and Albania.

Katie Priebe: Great. And so how did you originally get into crisis management, or your role at Hill & Knowlton? What interests you about crisis?

Bill Coletti: You know, it's just kind of a logical progression from campaigns and campaign politics. Those of us that have run campaigns, know that those folks kind of careen day in and day out from crisis to crisis, issue to issue. And then as I transferred away from candidates into more corporate work, it was kind of a logical progression that would continue on. And I sort of enjoy and appreciate that level of intensity.

Katie Priebe: Great. So did you, and you now own your own company in Austin. Is that correct?

Bill Coletti: Correct.

Katie Priebe: Okay.

Bill Coletti: Yeah, I started Kith Consulting in 2014.

Katie Priebe: In 2014. Okay. And were you based in the Hill & Knowlton office in Austin, or where was your home base?

Bill Coletti: So my offices were in New York and Austin. I lived in Austin, but our main offices were in New York.

Katie Priebe: Perfect. Okay. Great. Well, let's dive into a couple of the questions that I have. I'm bucketing out my project by pre-crisis, and the planning stage during the crisis, and then aftermath of a crisis. So, I'd love to get your thoughts on the preparation phase first, of crisis management, and the importance of it. Do you still feel that-

Bill Coletti: So what are you doing? Before, during, and after. Is that what you said?

Katie Priebe: Before, during, after. Yep.

Bill Coletti: Okay. Got it. Okay.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. So I thought we could start with the before the crisis, and the planning and preparation stage. So in your opinion, how should companies and organizations best plan for a crisis, in general, and then specifically on social media.

Bill Coletti: Yeah. You know, I think at a bare minimum, companies need to understand decision making chain of command. Because the saying goes that speed kills, but in a crisis situation, speed saves. And the ability to make decisions quickly, and the ability to get messages out to your key stakeholders quickly and efficiently, with as much information as possible, is kind of a main differentiator between those that succeed, and those that fail. Vacuums are not a friend in a crisis situation.

So at a minimum, in an advanced process, organizations need to figure out decision making chain of command. After that, kind of a pathway that they can take is the notion of scenario planning, where they can begin the process of mapping out various scenarios, that could potentially happen, doing some pre work, preparing holding statements, getting sort of the right people aware that if this happens, and sort of bucket them into an organized way. That's a critical step of getting yourself prepared and doing as much pre work as you can. And then after that, it's really doing simulation training, and really sitting with your team, and either doing a live fire exercise, to test your plan, or use it to identify the gap, or do just a tabletop exercise for one or two, sort of the most likely events that are gonna happen.

Katie Priebe: Sure.

Bill Coletti: In that second phase, in that planning process, where you gotta get, sort of, the chain of command understood, begin to catalog some of the issues that are there. I am not a big believer in this blue ocean strategy of where we just put up every potential scenario on a list, and kind of freak everybody out. I think the better way to do that, and to view risk the same way that risk managers view it, into three buckets. You have strategic risk, things that achieve significant enterprise value. You intended to do them, so they're a strategic risk. Preventable risks, things that you should have zero tolerance for, that do not achieve any economic value to your enterprise, and then external risk.

So I think as you go through that planning process, instead of talking about every possible permutation of what could go wrong, talk about things that we're doing, we mean to do, and that could potentially could have sort of misalignment of public expectations. That's strategic. Preventable things we should never do. Perfect example of that is a food company where there should not be lubricating oil in the food product. There should not be metal shavings in the food product. There should be anti-microbial. You should not allow anti-microbial to enter into the food supply. And then external are issues ... Really, quite frankly, when you look at most external issues, law enforcement is gonna take responsibility for that. So that would be an active shooter, a weather event, potentially some data breaches, depending upon specifically the kind of data breach that it is. You, as a corporation, are second fiddle to law enforcement in most externals. What I've found is, in planning, everybody over indexes for the external, because they're kind of these sexy black swans that can happen.

Bill Coletti: But quite frankly, my experience, in any number of these, is that you're second, you outsource the responsibility to law enforcement. And that's not good. I don't think you should do that, but that's just the reality of how a lot of people respond. So, the answer to your question is planning with chain of command, bucketing your risks, based on those 3 categories, and then do some sort of exercise or training function.

Katie Priebe: Sure. So when you bucket those vulnerabilities, for your clients, is that how you structure plans too? So when you develop a crisis communication plan for them, is that how you lay out, here are your strategic risks, here are your external risks, and these are the ones we've identified, so it's clear to them?

Bill Coletti: Absolutely. Because generally speaking, your responses ... Because it all depends on what are you gonna say. And generally speaking, your responses are more alike, based on the type of risk it is. So, for example, and that's where the plans come in, is that a strategic risk, so Epi-pen, Milan pharmaceuticals. They meant to raise the price on that product. Somebody sat around a conference table, and said, "Hey, we're charging \$40 this week. We should charge \$600 next week."

And so that was a thoughtful, strategic business decision. Give them the benefit of the doubt, that they're not ignorant. They did that strategically. And as you do things strategically, you introduce a new food coloring, you introduce a new controversial privacy policy, you have to defend it.

Bill Coletti: You can't just hope that you're not gonna get found out about it, and therefore go, "Oops. We didn't mean to do that." You've gotta defend it. That's where you get in trouble. So if it's strategic, you've gotta put in

place the strategy and defend it, and do the mitigation in advance with critical stakeholders, and getting third parties that are there.

Preventable. Apologize, fix it, and move on. You didn't mean to do it. It doesn't have any strategic benefit to you. Fess up. Own up. Fix it, and move on as fast as you can.

External. You're kind of one of the herd. If it's a weather event, or an active shooter, or a workplace violence, like we saw in Orlando this week, or if it is a data breach, is that you want to put yourself in the herd. That we're not ... This is a terrible tragedy, but unfortunately, we're not the first ones to be impacted by this. And we all should blah, blah, blah, whatever the situation is.

So the reason I do that bucketing is not just ... One, is that it simplifies blue ocean. But then it also then gives you a starting point of what your foundation should be for the response, what the messaging should be.

Katie Priebe: Great. No, that's really helpful. That's awesome. I agree. So what do you think companies are doing well, and what do you think they're not doing well, when it comes to the planning stage?

Bill Coletti: It's hard to answer that question, companies. I think generally, American companies lag European companies in their ability to plan, for crises. We don't ... I think Europe is a little bit more developed, particularly in simulation training, and doing simulation. I think that companies in certain industries, that have some sort of legally required mitigation strategy, so for example, the banking industry is required to look at risk, by legislation. I think the food industry, all aspects of the food industry, is required to have plans in place for food borne illness and all issues like that. I think they do a good job. I think airlines do a relatively good job with crashes, things that they're kind of known for. I think, as we've seen with United, and everybody's still talking about it, they obviously didn't have planning in place there. Or if they did, somebody was asleep at the switch, or somebody wasn't at the office when they should've been at the office, or something like that. That's there.

So I think companies that think about it, do a good job in preparing and planning. I think where they really miss the boat is they do too much planning. They consider every possible permutation of every crazy thing that could go on, and the exercise, and the communications infrastructure, just loses credibility.

Because it's just simply not credible to be that kind of cuckoo about everything.

Katie Priebe: So, switching to this conversation as it relates to social media, maybe tell me a little bit about the counsel that you give to your clients regarding managing a crisis that stems from social media, or escalates on social media.

Bill Coletti: Yeah. I think chasing social is a mistake, because you can never keep up with it. One team augmented by an agency, augmented by a trade association, cannot keep up with the democratization of information that is out there on social. I think they can try, and respond in kind, and at the early stages, to respond one on one. But I think the best strategy is to get a good durable statement out there. Update it and refresh it periodically, depending upon the situations, whether that be every couple of hours, or every day, or once a week, depending upon the burn of the situation. So I think best practice is get a statement out early, that shows, based on the risk that it is, that shows what you stand for, what you believe, and what you're doing about how you're gonna fix it, and how people can get back to normal as fast as possible.

I then think they need to update that, as new information comes along, at a nice, predictable cadence, so that you become the source of truth, and the source of truth doesn't become somebody else that's out there. I think chasing every Tom, Dick, and Harry, is a mistake. And it's a waste of time. It's a waste of effort. I think the last piece that mitigates that about chasing everybody, is that you should have a good sense about influencers, and who are the key influencers on social, that matter to you. You should have done some thinking, and some work in advance on that, so that you are, so that you know when various canaries in the coal mine chime in. Hopefully, you would've reached out to them in advance, if they're true key stakeholders, that you are paying attention to what they have to say.

Katie Priebe: Sure. No, definitely. I agree. That makes sense. So, talking about the statement, and getting out early, and then updating. I know it's tactical, but where do you think that statement should live? What's the best practice for getting that statement out? Do you think it should be on social, or should it be on a company's website, or offline somewhere?

Bill Coletti: Both. I think it should be on a website, and pinned to social.

Yeah. You know, if you're in a situation, why make it hard on people to find it? Might as well make it as easy as possible. If this is what you're saying about the situation, and it's durable across all your different audiences, internal, external, and what have you, then there's no reason to be shy about it. I think that, hopefully, companies have one key social asset that they really use, and use best, and it's for their corporate voice, whether that's Facebook, or LinkedIn, or whatever, Twitter, whatever that

is. But I think, A, you put it on your website, and then B, you link back to that content off your website.

People start to get too cute. People try to get way too cute with that. I just, I think that's consultants trying to justify fancy strategies. I think you've just gotta get the message out there as fast as you can. And you're not really gonna park it very appropriately.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Definitely. No, I agree. And then, going back to your point about thinking about influencers. How important is that? And I agree with you. I think that's an important component of understanding your audiences. So, can you maybe talk a little bit more about that?

Bill Coletti: Yeah. So I believe, as a part of any exercise, good communication and organization should do some semblance of stakeholder evaluation. I don't think stakeholder mapping, in and of itself, is the right idea, because I think they just create the confusing spider charts, that nobody knows what the heck they mean. But I think you should organize your stakeholders, and the communities that impact you most, your various customer segments, and then, critics. And so if you organize yourself across those three Cs of community, customers, and critics, I think you've got a really good foundation of understanding who matters.

I then think, very specifically, on social, is that there are people that you should be building affinity with, whether they be key influencers on policy that you care about, key influencers on ... Industry watchers, you should be developing a relationship with them, and they fall into my community bucket. Those are communities of interest for you. It's hard to do that in real time. I guess you can do it in real time. But it's actually much easier to do that once you've established some relationship with a set of people, and the reason you're doing it is to advocate your brand. But also when the time comes, and you want to get the benefit of the doubt, and you want people to say, "Well, that's not the company X that I know. Here's what I know about them, and here's been my interactions with them." That's what you're looking for.

Katie Priebe: Sure. Definitely. Do you think that ... Tell me a little bit about your thoughts about senior leadership, and social media. Do you think that there is a sense of understanding at the senior level, CEO level, about the speed of social media? Or do you think that it's still an unknown? It's there. I mean, it's not going away, but do you think that there's a true understanding among decision makers on social media, or do you think there's room for improvement?

Bill Coletti: I think people are getting it.

I think they're getting it over time. It's kind of ... I think the days of where people are like, "Oh my gosh. This will never happen to me," or that people were very critical of CEOs. They didn't get it. Read the paper. Social drives everything now, and I think you gotta be ... I give CEOs and corporate leaders a lot of credit, to figure out what's going on. I think that's an old tape, and a good narrative for agencies to tell, but I don't think it's accurate.

Katie Priebe: Sure. That makes sense. Do you think that there are social media platforms that tend to have more of an impact during a crisis situation? I know we talked about just getting your message out, but are there certain platforms that should be given more attention to than others, to get that message out? Or do you think it doesn't matter?

Bill Coletti: Well, I think it depends on the brand. Twitter's Twitter. President Trump has made that a thing, even though it was already a thing before that. I think it's the big three. I think it's Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. People forget about Google Plus, but there's audiences there. So, are you asking me is there one that I think is better, or different, or stronger than the other? Is that the question?

Not really. Not really. I think it depends on ... Hopefully you've invested and made a strategic decision as a corporation of where you're gonna put your assets. Because I think being all things to all people in all places is a mistake. I think kind of reeling in, "We're gonna be a Facebook company. We're gonna really make it happen on LinkedIn," or "We're gonna supplement everything on Twitter," needs to be a strategic decision that's made earlier. But I think Twitter is the new assignment editor. I think news media are following Twitter to get what's gonna happen next.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I totally agree. Definitely. In your role, what do you ... Where do you see your role, in your past job in the agency world, and then with your current company, where do you think you come in when you're working with organizations? So what kind of counsel is key that you're seeing on how to navigate organizations or individuals through a social media issue, or a crisis in general?

Bill Coletti: So can you ... Is the question, at what point do I insert? Or what do I say once I've inserted?

Katie Priebe: Yeah. What's kind of your ... What do you say once you're inserted? So you're brought in for a situation, and this organization is maybe not understanding X,Y,Z, or is going through a big issue. Where do you see your counsel and your role, and what are some best practices that you for sure want to talk about with your clients?

Bill Coletti: Okay. There are two things that I think are really important. One is to take a big picture view. You gotta keep all of this stuff in perspective. I think we overreact often to situations. So the first instinct is to keep a big perspective on everything that's going on relative to where the enterprise fits, so what I call a view from the mountain top. So you gotta see where we fit, and where the organization is, relative to this threat, and where it is relative to key stakeholders. That's done very quickly. And then after that, it's this paradox of laser focus. I think you then need to really laser focus on the handful of things that really matter, and move the narrative. And really focus on those, and really get those right. So I think those two things. Big picture view. Where do you fit in the enterprise, or where does this issue fit in the scope of the enterprise. And then focus on two or three things that are really critically important, whether that be stakeholders, or that be thinking about Congress, whether that be ... Whatever the issue is, really focusing in on them with laser focus are sort of the first two steps.

The third step I try to do is figure out that chain of command. Where are the sources of influence, and how do decisions get made in this organization? What's kind of the cultural alignment for fast decision making? So I think those are kind of the three things that I focus on.

Katie Priebe: Sure. Definitely. No, that makes sense. That sounds good. And then, just going back to some of your previous experience with other cultures, was there anything that surprised you, or that was a big take away from your work in crisis, working with other countries, and other influencers abroad?

In the way that maybe the audience identifies with the crisis situation, or is impacted by a reputational issue? Was there anything, like in ... Yeah. Go ahead.

Bill Coletti: Yeah. I think democracies have a generally broader view of access to information. And so, in Thailand, which is a democracy, but in Thailand, kind of screw the public, and you've seen, because the public doesn't really have a great right to know and need to know, and receive some backlash on that, for example. So I think in command and control economies, particularly in China, is that the public doesn't need to know as much as they need to know in the United States. It's a little bit more managed.

I think that global news media has kind of changed that. It's not just singular. You can't just manage an issue within the borders of one particular country. There can be regional implications, and then there's global implications, because what happens in China impacts, and particularly on a major issue, certainly impacts what goes on in the United States, from a trade standpoint.

But yeah, I think different countries have different cultures. I think they have different standards of media access, different standards of inquiry that they have, so yeah. I think the region and the country really depend on the necessity of responding, which is why that big picture view is really the critical first step of what I think is important.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Definitely. No, that's great. Did you do a lot of traveling, I take it?

Bill Coletti: Yeah.

Too much.

Katie Priebe: Too much? Yeah. I'm sure. So thinking about the aftermath of a crisis, what are some best practices that you find to be effective in dealing with the aftermath of a crisis? Or that you would recommend to companies.

Bill Coletti: Is learn. How did we get here? And do some sort of post mortem evaluation study to try to understand what's there. Begin the process while it's fresh in everybody's mind. Begin the process of an audit of all of your other risks that you have. Begin to evaluate sort of where you are. And then I think you need to really think about reputation management, so how do you begin to ... You've been through this even. Get really clear on how will you mitigate against this and other events through some activities of reputation management. I think there's a process for reputation management. I don't think it's just a one-off event and just good PR. I think it's really much more comprehensive than that. But I think that's where you need to go post-crisis, is that there's some healing that needs to be done. Organizations need to be very thoughtful about, once you're out of the woods, there are lingering but unsaid implications, and I don't think you should simply blow those off. So I think using it as an opportunity for planning, using it as an opportunity to build a foundation for reputational growth after the situation, and then use it as an opportunity to re-catalog, and identify those stakeholders that you wished were on your side after the fact.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Definitely. So all of this is best practice for crisis. Do you view social media as almost a stakeholder within a crisis situation, or are these best practices too that can be implemented you think, in social? Or is social like a traffic of information? I don't know if that makes sense, but ...

Bill Coletti: Yeah. Social is like traffic.

It is what it is. And so I think that social media, it's kind of like what do you consider Microsoft Word? Is that a medium? Is that a channel? It's kind of

like, social has just become so ubiquitous. I think you have ... And nobody talked about the radio strategy, versus the TV strategy, versus the print strategy. Is it just media? It's just the media strategy. And I think social is quickly becoming that. It's just, it is what it is. It is ubiquitous. It's everywhere. It's not a stakeholder. I think that's a mistake, because there are humans behind it. Twitter does not have a stake. Facebook does not have a stake. The audience is there. The individuals that make up that channel or that platform, they have stakes. Therefore, they hold them. But I don't think the channels themselves, or the platforms themselves have anything magical about them.

Katie Priebe: Sure. No, that makes sense. Definitely. What would be ... Just a couple more questions. What would be some of your counsel on a successful tabletop exercise? So, when you get through the crisis, and you've evaluated, and now you're starting back on how you can better an organization. So what would be ... How would you define success when you're doing a tabletop exercise with a client?

Bill Coletti: So I guess, how do you identify success, that last part of your question. I think if you've identified real gaps.

That you've identified real gaps, and those real gaps get solved. That's real success. Having experience where everybody's hair's on fire. People potentially get embarrassed, and don't know where to find information. That's nice. But I think the true learning is to identify these gaps, and then begin the process of fixing those gaps. So it's very much a gap analysis.

Katie Priebe: Sure. That makes sense. Okay. Good. And then, anything else that stands out to you or that you wanted to mention, just about crisis in general, or best practices?

Bill Coletti: No. I mean, I think your PhD paper should be on the evolution of crisis through reputation management. Because that's the book that I've got coming out is talking about that evolution from crisis to reputation. What do you do about it? How do you actually make reputation management manageable?

And so that's kind of where I'm going next. So no. I don't think I've got anything else critical on that.

Katie Priebe: No. That sounds great. And then just one follow up question on a personal front for me. So, any career advice that you have for me, as someone who's interested in making crisis management and leadership, or crisis, a career long term? Any advice that you have, or that you give to your teams on understanding the space, or any literature that would be good to read?

Bill Coletti: Yeah. So just be a consumer of the news. I mean, that's the biggest thing. I think learning from case studies is valuable, but I think you get as much of that as from just being a consumer of the news, asking yourself how would I handle that situation. Things like that are critical.

I think being ... I don't believe in best practices. I think that best practices are for industries that are not quite as dynamic as crisis. I think there are some things that have worked in the past, that I can learn from and apply in other situations. But I always think there's a better practice. And so, there are some standards that apply. Always apply those. But I think when we start having formulaic cookie cutter approaches, which is what best practices infer, I think that's a mistake. So I think being a consumer of the news, asking yourself how would I handle that situation, and don't become a slave to what other people have done. I think those are kind of three things that really matter.

Katie Priebe: Okay.

Bill Coletti: And then, you know, move to Austin and come work for us.

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Bill Coletti: Get out of Minnesota.

Katie Priebe: No. For sure. I hear ya.

Bill Coletti: My winters are a hell of a lot better.

Katie Priebe: Oh my gosh. Yeah. No. And I've actually been to Austin once, but I'm trying to get back. I hear it's just a fun city.

Bill Coletti: [crosstalk 00:30:47] It's awesome. Yeah, it's great. It's great.

Katie Priebe: No. Definitely. Do you do a lot of work still in New York, or are you mostly in Austin?

Bill Coletti: I do. No. New York's where I am mostly.

Katie Priebe: Oh really? Okay.

Bill Coletti: In New York. I do a lot of food, so I'm in Wichita Kansas a lot. And then I'm with Cargill, so I'm up there a good little bit.

Katie Priebe: Oh, that's great. Yeah, I went to school at the University of Kansas. Did my undergraduate there, so familiar with Kansas.

Bill Coletti: Okay sure. Yeah. So I'm in Wichita a bunch.

Katie Priebe: Sure. No. That's great. Well I'll be in ... Next time you're in New York, or if that's where you are most of the time, it'd be great if maybe you'd be willing to maybe meet for a networking meeting in person. It'd be great to meet you in person.

Bill Coletti: You bet. Yeah. Just drop me a note. Keep in touch with me on my social stuff, and read some of our stuff, and I'll add your email to some things we'll work on. But yeah. I think that'd be cool.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. That'd be great.

Bill Coletti: Just keep in touch with me.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. I will definitely do that. That sounds great.

Bill Coletti: Sounds good.

Katie Priebe: Well thank you. I appreciate your time today.

Bill Coletti: Uh-huh. Thank you. Bye.

Katie Priebe: We'll talk to you soon. Bye-bye.

Bill Coletti: Appreciate it. Bye-bye.

Rob Clark, Vice President of Global Communications at Medtronic

The interview with Rob Clark was conducted in-person on June 9, 2017. The interview lasted about forty-five minutes. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Katie Priebe: Okay, I'll put this by you so it picks up.

Rob Clark: Sure.

Katie Priebe: So what would you like for this project, purpose of the project, your title to be?

Rob Clark: It's Vice President, Global Communications in Corporate Market.

Interviewer: Perfect. So maybe we can start with, just for some of your background in crisis in what your roles of responsibilities are-

Rob Clark: Sure.

Katie Priebe: -at Medtronic.

Rob Clark: So I've been in this field for 20+ years and have had some form of crisis response, crisis communications responsibility for almost all my career and have gone through a number of, what we consider organizational crisis. Both my time in the Air Force, we spent a lot of time doing crisis management, as you can imagine. And then in my professional career, public career, or private career with Medtronic and the telecommunications industry, so a number of major product recalls in the health care space ... Very high profile mergers and acquisitions and deals like that, and then we've had ... I've worked a number of social media-based issues, as well.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. So tell me a little about the social media issues, not per se the actual issue, but some strategies that you implemented, maybe in the pre-crisis or the planning stage for that.

Rob Clark: Sure.

Katie Priebe: I'm kind of bucketing my capstone into pre-crisis, during the crisis, and after the crisis, and best practices around that. So the planning stage, do you think it's important to plan for-

Rob Clark: Very important to plan.

Katie Priebe: -for social media?

Rob Clark: Very important to have guidelines, and tools, and processes in place that you train to so that if it indeed happens, something happens, you've got a well-oiled way to deal with it. So at Medtronic, we have a social media policy that governs how people are to interact or participate in social media if they're using a Medtronic-based account, or on a Medtronic channel. And so we update that policy on a yearly basis.

In addition to that, we've created escalation guides, so that we're constantly monitoring social media and our social media channels and chatter about Medtronic. And if an issue were to materialize, a negative issue or a potential reputational issue were to materialize, we've got a notification and escalation procedure about how we respond, who needs to be informed. And then we, in some instances, have already created template approved responses, immediate ways to respond or react to something on social media. So all that's built in on the front end, we try to train to that.

And then the only other piece I would say, is just really strict controls on who has access to and who can post, push the information relative to a Medtronic channel.

Katie Priebe: Sure, no, that makes sense. Going back to some of the policies, and it sounds like you guys update yearly.

Rob Clark: Yep.

Katie Priebe: Do you find that employees are respectful of those policies? Or how do you, as a leadership team, especially with the size of Medtronic, disperse that policy?

Rob Clark: Yeah. I think the good news for Medtronic is, because we're in a heavily regulated health care environment, our employees are conditioned that what they write, and what they say, and what they project outside of the company has a lot of regulatory and government scrutiny, and so there's a conservativeness and a cautiousness that's built into our employees. In some respects, we'd actually like our employees to be more active on social media. But we're pretty, we benefit from that, in the sense that our employees are pretty smart about what they do. Considering we have upwards of 90,000 employees, we've really only had a few

minor issues relative to employee going outside of the bounds of the guidelines. So we've been pretty fortunate.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, no, that's great. And that's a testament too, to your team, senior leadership, that you guys are able to disperse that communication internally.

Do you find when speaking with senior leaders at Medtronic, or in general, do you feel like they have a grasp on managing the issue on social media? Or do you think that, is it tough for some people to understand the speed of social and how it works?

Rob Clark: I think the speed is something that they don't understand. It's very hard for them to understand how quickly and how fast it takes. I think there's two things. One is, the speed by which it can go, number one, and that's not something that they're used to having to react to. And then secondly, that they have to, frankly, relinquish control for the experts to deal with it in the middle of a crisis. Where their inclination is to be all over it, to manage every aspect of it. And with the pace and the speed, it's very difficult for them to do that.

So, I think, what they have to understand is that there are, you put processes in place, you put templated responses that are pre-approved for certain scenarios, and then you let your people do that, and execute that. And that can be hard for some management to let go and trust that that's gonna be done effectively in the middle of all that taking off.

So, those are my observations, and I think, the other thing that is typical, is that a typical management team at a large company, they're not millennials. They're not necessarily socially networked and highly adept at social, so it's a bit foreign to them, and it's a bit foreign for them to understand its impact and so forth. So that's just the way it is, and I think that's why we really drill on templates, processes, pre-approved things, so that, take the emotion out of it, and it's based upon best-in-class processes and things like that.

Katie Priebe: No, that makes sense. I'm kind of getting tactical here, but, the next question I have is, when you find an issue on social media, is it, in your expertise, do you respond directly on those channels? Or is it best to take it either offline, or release some kind of statement that umbrellas all sort of chatter on social.

Rob Clark: It's somewhat dependent on the situation. For example, we have a very active CEO on Twitter. In the top 10 CEOs on Twitter, in terms of volume and presence, following, things like that. And so,

we have a large population of readers that are patients of our products. And in our case, if they were to say, "Hey, my product didn't work," or whatever, we're obligated by the FDA, within 24 hours, we have to respond. So what we do on those, is we take those, we triage those offline, we'll set up a direct message capability with that individual so we can take it offline.

In other situations where somebody is saying something or projecting something about the company that's not true, we might weigh in with a statement, and let that be our statement. And then in a couple of instances where we've had more escalation, a lot more volume, we've had to issue multiple statements over a period of 48 hours, based upon where the discussion is trending and the facts, if they're wrong or right. So it's somewhat dependent on the situation. But with the regulatory obligation relative to health care, any kind of patient, in fact, we do have to set up direct channels, and take that offline.

Katie Priebe: That's interesting. I didn't know that, obviously monitoring is really important, but in your case, or in Medtronic's case, you have to monitor.

Rob Clark: We have to monitor for regulatory reasons. We have 24-48 hours to follow up and conduct an investigation on what we think may have transpired with the product, work with their physician, perhaps. And then if it is of a certain nature, we have to file, it's called an MDR, a medical device report, with the FDA.

Katie Priebe: Interesting.

Rob Clark: And so we do have to have a monitoring capability that's pretty sophisticated.

Katie Priebe: Right, yeah.

Rob Clark: Which is another reason, by the way, some of our businesses don't want to go on social media. They don't want to participate because they don't want to provoke the conversation. Which is a fair conduct, right?

Katie Priebe: No, that's interesting, yeah. When you're in the middle of a crisis, do you find that ... Say it's a crisis that's unrelated to social media, it didn't start on social, it wasn't a customer complaint or anything, do you find that social media escalates things more quickly now than it used to be?

Rob Clark: Absolutely. We've had a couple of instances where it's gone from zero to 60 pretty quickly. I think what you find is, depending on the issue, there are embedded communities of activists and people that are-

Katie Priebe: Watching you, yeah.

Rob Clark: -out there all the time, and if they see that lights 'em up, they go full speed. Yeah, it can escalate very quickly.

Katie Priebe: A couple of experts that I've talked to, as well, have said one of the things that companies should do is identify influencers. So identify those when it's a nice, sunny day before you're actually dealing with an issue, and who those influencers are. Do you have any thoughts on that, or does Medtronic do anything like that?

Rob Clark: We do some of that. In some of our therapy areas that we deal in, diabetes for one, there's some other, in the gastro/uro space, in certain health spaces, there are communities of people already online. Who talk about their condition, who share notes on how they're dealing with their condition, and we participate in those. And within those, like in everything else, there's prolific posters, there's bloggers, there's people that carry influence within some of those communities. And we do spend time with them and provide more background if they want it, so that there's context and there're maybe people that understand our devices or our contribution in a deeper way, so they're not just hearing it from Medtronic if there's a question about something. We do some of that, and it's been helpful in certain situations.

Katie Priebe: That's good. What do you think stands out, as an organization who can successfully manage a crisis on social and traditional channels, versus, maybe a company ... How do you know if you're doing it well, or how do you know if you're a company that is not doing it well?

Rob Clark: I think if you're United, you know you didn't do it well. At the end of the day, I think there's two aspects of it. One is responding, and having the processes, and triaging, and escalation, and all that stuff in place.

The second is, what to do you say? And I think you've gotta be focused on those. And I think, depending on the issue, usually authenticity, truth, humility probably works best in most of these situations. Depending on the situation.

And we've also had situations where it's not a winnable discussion, because there's a certain constituency or advocacy base that is not gonna be convinced no matter what you say. Just draw the line. Just make your statement, draw your line, and let it go. And I think the other thing you often find, is things blow over in 24, 48 hours. So it does depend on the situation.

Katie Priebe: That makes sense. In the aftermath of an issue, are there any best practices or anything that you recommend? Say you and your team are leading an issue, it's on the back end, it's done. So, what do you do on the back end?

Rob Clark: I think with every ... We've had, I'd say three social media-based issues, or events, over the last six months. Each one was a little different. We learned something every time, a little bit differently. And what we've been focusing on is ensuring that everyone in our function learns from those three instances. And so a lot of post mortems, a lot of case studies, and just weaving that into your trainings. Because now you've got some real-life examples of scenarios that you can run.

And two out of the three, it's a lot of judgment. Right? You can process it and preplan all you want. In the middle of it, there's still some judgment to be had. And so, walking through the judgment process, and why was a decision made a certain way, and making sure everyone on our team, at least, understands about what calculus went into it, as a post mortem, is important I think.

Katie Priebe: No, definitely. Do you find it challenging, as an organization as a whole, with Medtronic being such a world-wide organization, and a lot of employees, do you find that that is ... Does that hinder or does that help crisis response? As opposed to maybe a smaller organization that has less employees and less online influence. Or is it just different?

Rob Clark: I think it's just different. Our employee base is pretty good about ... I mean, I don't know what they do personally, on their personal channels, but we rarely see their personal channels spill into us. I just think that, again we benefit from the fact that our people are fairly conditioned to being careful on social media because of the regulatory impact. No one wants to embarrass the company, no one wants to say something that would put us at some sort of regulatory risk, or legal risk. I think we've got a good culture in that regard. But you're one message away from all that going down the tubes. So, I don't know how better to answer that.

Katie Priebe: No, no, that makes sense. Yeah.

Rob Clark: It is what it is.

Katie Priebe: There's one study that I found, and this may go into some of your travels and cultural experiences, but there's one study I found about KFC and McDonald's managing an issue in China, and it was on social media, and they just managed it both very differently. And McDonald's came out on top in Chinese culture, KFC did not, just based on how they handled it. And it was an issue that started internally, so food, I can't remember exactly, but issues with the food and everything. So how important is, if you are a global company like Medtronic, the cultural aspect of, if you're dealing with an issue in China, understanding Chinese culture?

Rob Clark: It's huge, and I think ... In China, by the way, right, they have their WeChat, and they have their own social channels. And so we participate in those, we have people who are monitoring those, as well. So your response has to be culturally appropriate, as well. We've not really had, we've not had a lot of issues outside of the US, but the ones that are in our market, the markets that are the most socially active in terms of pretty large social networks and activity, are India and China. You treat them the same, in the sense of you're really watching volume. What is the impact? And who's following you? And then you just have to defer to your local people about the cultural aspect of it, in terms of any responses.

Katie Priebe: Trust the boots on the ground, yeah.

Rob Clark: We've not really had any crises or negative issues, per se. We had one issue in China where there was a lot of media coverage, which generated a lot of social media chatter, but it never got out of hand, we never felt like we had to jump into it or respond. But, we've never had anything negatively directed at the company that created an issue or a lot of social chatter. We've been pretty fortunate in that regard.

Katie Priebe: No, definitely. That makes sense. When you-

Rob Clark: By the way, outside of that, the other thing for us ... The other advantage Medtronic has here, to some degree, is we're not a household name. We're not a household brand. Really in any market. We're well-known in the medical community, in hospitals around the world, and so forth, but we're not a consumer, household brand.

Katie Priebe: Sure. Yeah. So that's probably ... Do you feel like consumer, household brands have more eyes and ears and finger-pointing?

Rob Clark: Absolutely. Oh yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Katie Priebe: When you talk about, or reevaluate the vulnerabilities of Medtronic, how does that conversation go, around social? Are there any vulnerabilities, you don't have to name, if it's confidential.

Rob Clark: My biggest issue is just missing something. Because we're 90,000 people, and we're in 160 countries. And if we miss something in our monitoring and find out that we've been maligned for 48 hours in some country that I didn't even know we were being maligned in. I think that's my biggest, if you miss something, or you don't react fast enough.

But stuff travels fast. And I'll tell you one instance we had, it was social media-based. And it was all well-meaning, it was our employees in Australia shot a video, again with all good intention. It was a customer service team shot a video, posted it on YouTube. It was nothing technically inappropriate about it, it's just not brand, it's not something we would have done that's fully in a line with our work. And it happened in Australia, and knew about in two minutes. Somebody flagged us to say, "Have you seen this?" That's all the way around the world, and so we feel like we've got pretty good monitoring in place.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, yeah, two minutes and you knew what was going on in Australia.

Rob Clark: And there's some good self-policing in our own company. You know, like, "Hey did you know this was out there?" Or this got said, or whatever.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. No, that's great. And this is probably a personal question for me, but as someone who's interested in crisis and continuing to build my skills. What do you see as, for someone like me, coming up, trying to work my way up, if you will, what kind of skills or expertise do you think is useful and should be focused on as I continue to grow? You know, coming off of this project and in general.

Rob Clark: I think that one thing is being measured and level-headed when these things are going on. I don't know how you train for that, other than to scenario plan and do mock crisis exercises and things like that. I think one of the core things that management looks for from their communications people when this stuff happens is, the communications people can't be running around with their hair on fire, like, "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!"

It's very measured and fact-based, here's what we know, here's the facts coming in. Here's what our training tells us, how we should respond. Just being very measured, and not being a part of the crisis. Not making the crisis worse. And doing things that are based as much in fact as possible.

Because sometimes, too, your initial reaction on how you should respond is not always right. And sometimes you need to let things play out a little bit. I don't know how to, again it's tough to train for, other than I think it's a mindset of when you approach a crisis about I'm going to be measured, I'm going to be very fact-based, I'm going to be very disciplined, data-driven, in how I advise management to deal with it, based upon best practices and all the things you've put in place before. And again, not be part of the crisis, and not contribute to what can be mayhem. Because some people don't react well, and they're asking you to do dumb things, and it's like, wait a second.

Katie Priebe: It's emotional-based instead of fact-based.

Rob Clark: It can be emotionally-based, and separate the emotion from it. And some people are cut out for that and some people aren't, frankly.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, no, definitely. No, that makes sense. Yeah, I agree.

Rob Clark: I think the other thing is just really look and continue to learn from people who go through it. There's a lot to be learned from United, in terms of how they mishandled this crisis, and what they did. I'm sure there's more to that story that we just don't even know in terms of their judgments and some of the things they did. But at the end of the day, there's a lot to be learned in every situation. And stay current on what is best practice, what's been learned by others.

Katie Priebe: No, that makes sense. There is one expert I interviewed earlier this week, he was like, "I don't know if I believe in best practices." That each situation is different. Which, I agree, each situation is different, but what's your thought on, should there be bullet points of, like we've talked about today, monitoring as a best practice. Or even as a bullet point of being level-headed, or should-

Rob Clark: I think that, if you take, corporations have obviously been very sensitive to being tweeted about by the President. Well, some companies have gone through that, where the President has tweeted about them, it's affected their stock price. There's been a

fair amount of discussion by Chief Communications Officers, by companies about, how would you respond?

And most companies that have taken that seriously, have created, again scenarios. What are the five or six scenarios that the President might tweet about the company, and how would I respond? In that instance, there's a developing consensus about how to respond to him. Which is something like, "That may not be entirely true, Mr. President. Why don't we get together and talk about it?" The thing to do with him, is get a room with him. Turn it into an immediate meeting, of dialogue.

So there are best practices, people have learned, it's staying close to that. It only makes sense. And learn from it.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, no, I completely agree.

Rob Clark: There's truth that everything has its own subtleties and some differences, but-

Katie Priebe: But at its core, there is.

Rob Clark: There's some core principles there about how you do this, it's the basic concept of best practices. And learning.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, no, I agree.

Rob Clark: When you drag a guy off an airplane, your first inclination would probably to not be to say your employees have done fine.

Katie Priebe: Yeah, exactly. Or we apologize for the re-accommodation, or whatever they said. Pretty sure slamming your head against the seat is not re-accommodating.

Rob Clark: It's interesting. I would love to go look at the email traffic on how they came up with those responses.

Katie Priebe: Oh yeah, right. Oh, I agree. Or be in the War Room, just some of those meetings. That's interesting.

Rob Clark: But anyways, I think there are best practices. And there's some research to see. I think IPR, which I'm a member of, The Institute for Public Relations, they just put a study together where they went out and talked to the top, they talked to a bunch of Chief Communications Officers about what is their Presidential

response plan, and what is best practice in the learning. I think everybody can benefit from that.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. No, this is good. Anything else that you want to mention that I missed?

Rob Clark: Not really. I guess the only other thing is don't, I think you had a question to this effect somewhere, but it's you can't completely shut out earned media, either, in these things.

Katie Priebe: Earned, as in, you mean traditional media?

Rob Clark: Yeah, because if you think about if you're in a crisis, and it has any ramifications in terms of regulatory, congressional, legal. The social media aspect of these crises, they're gonna play out over 24, 48 hours and those people are gonna be gone. It's the earned media that's gonna take that story move it, continue to move it and create ...

Katie Priebe: An extended news cycle.

Rob Clark: Right, or could create more heartburn for you, in terms of really following up on it. Understanding what happened and things like that. I think as you respond and as you go through it, you have to have an eye towards, what is this gonna prompt in an earned media-base, or is there something I could do with an earned media reporter to provide more context and depth to what's going on in a particular instance. That also then becomes a product of social media. It's not like either/or.

Katie Priebe: They're connected.

Rob Clark: And some are more joined than others. Some reporters are more, and publications, are socially-minded.

Katie Priebe: It's always interesting how, when I was a reporter, and I used to do this, and I think they still do, go on Twitter and that could be your assignment desk for the day. What's going on on Twitter? And then that's the story that turns into the 5:00 p.m. newscast. Which is always interesting.

Rob Clark: I don't know what the stat is, is it 60+% of the stories in our media are derived from social media?

Katie Priebe: From social, yeah.

Rob Clark: We've been struggling with, I've got people that just live and die by press releases. And it's like, "Guys, nobody's reading them." There's no evidence that these things are getting picked up in a dramatic way, other than three or four trade publications. We don't need to put that over the wire.

Katie Priebe: You pay money, it's expensive to put it over the wire.

Katie Priebe: Right.

Yeah.

Rob Clark: So no, I think that's about it. I don't have much more to add to.

Katie Priebe: No, this is really helpful. Is there any other research or literature that you think would be useful for me to read through as I'm finalizing this?

Rob Clark: No, not probably other than the ones you know. I think through the normal sources, like QSA. I think that IPR has some good crisis stuff.

Katie Priebe: I-P-R?

Rob Clark: Yeah, it's Institute for Public Relations. There's a lot of crisis-related materials, and stuff that they've produced over the years. Or that academics have produced that they've pushed through their channels.

And then I think learn from what others have done.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. Monitor the news cycle. I've been trying to do that more, too, just see what issues are in the news and how they handle them. Or didn't.

Rob Clark: It's also tough, because you don't, if you're not inside the company, it's hard to understand-

Katie Priebe: The decision making.

Rob Clark: Why decisions were made. There's a lot of stuff that happens behind the scenes that may impact the decision, and so I try not to be overly critical of communications people because I know enough about the influences of legal, and HR, and leadership. Sometimes you can't win the argument, and the business makes a decision that ultimately backfires. Or may not have been the

communications person's recommendation. They may have gone against their recommendation.

I think we all can tell, in many instances, where it's like, okay, lawyers were in charge of that response. And sometimes it falls flat because it's more legal in tone, and legal in approach, versus human and public in approach. There's a balance. We have actually been fortunate at Medtronic, that our ... I've been through three general councils, and different legal steps, but our legal team has always had a mindset of understanding reputation, understanding public reputation, and partnering with us very well on, how do make sure that we don't create legal jeopardy for ourselves, but responds to the public in the public's request for information. We've been pretty fortunate with that. Some companies, it's different.

Katie Priebe: That's what I've heard, it's tough. The ones that it's tough, the lawyers are paid to save the dining room table. And they find success saving the dining room table when the house is on fire, but we're paid to save the house. And that doesn't always, you know?

Rob Clark: Exactly. Again, we've been pretty fortunate that our folks cut through that, and then they'll get to the point where my general council and I, we will wordsmith together. Like, what about this, and what about that, and if we say it this way and that way. We've been pretty fortunate.

Katie Priebe: Wow, that's great.

Rob Clark: And they can also look, what I find, too, is often times, the legal risk on some of this stuff is actually pretty low. Look at, I think United's another example. They could've come out immediately and just done a complete mea culpa. Their lawyers could've approached that guy, they could've wrote a check. It could've been done and over. We screwed up, we're gonna double-down on our process to make sure this doesn't happen again, apologize to that gentleman, send their lawyers in there to write a check to the guy. He would've been fine. And that could've been done in 48 hours. Instead ...

Dexter Davis, Director of Procurement at Securian Financial

The interview with Dexter Davis was conducted in-person on June 16, 2017. The interview lasted about twenty minutes. The following is a transcript of our conversation.

Katie Priebe: Okay, and I'll just record that. Okay.

Dexter Davis: Okay.

Katie Priebe: So, just for the purposes of the paper, can you give me your title that you would like incorporated into this? Your job title.

Dexter Davis: Oh. Director of Enterprise Procurement.

Katie Priebe: So tell me a little bit about, like we just talked about, your view on crisis and social media and what your organization ... Some of your thoughts of the organization that you're at right now.

Dexter Davis: My thoughts on that, and I think as we are growing and developing our social media footprint and our digital footprint, being in the financial services industry ... Being in the financial business has become more of a focus for us. And I think as we build that capability up, that'd still be more and more of what we're looking at, how we're dividing us, and how, not only just from a crisis perspective, just understanding it more the consumer reaction of how things are and how they're responding to our product.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm. One of the things that I found in my research, so far, is just the importance of monitoring.

Dexter Davis: Yup.

Katie Priebe: So, is that something that you and the organization--

Dexter Davis: Social listening?

Katie Priebe: Yeah, social listening--

Dexter Davis: Yes. Yes, we do that. Yes. Yeah. Yup.

Katie Priebe: Okay. Do you do that now?

Dexter Davis: Yes.

Yeah. But that's recent. That's over the, probably, last year. I would say other organizations, who was more robust, we've been there, but that was more consumer goods, where it was really more ... We had a bigger social footprint but yeah, we have just started doing this thing. In fact, it's become such more of a focus for us that we have a whole new division in digital that we didn't have two years ago. So I think as we continue to build that out, the more and more that's going to be a key part of what we do - And then you're going to have crisis responses when those things happen, but hopefully we have good processes in place where that's not going to happen.

Katie Priebe: Definitely. So maybe just tell me briefly, to build that out have you had to hire people?

Dexter Davis: Yes.

Katie Priebe: Are you having to like--

Dexter Davis: We still are.

Katie Priebe: You still are?

Dexter Davis: Yes. Yes.

Katie Priebe: Okay. So that's in the building stages right now?

Dexter Davis: Yes. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. We started off with a Chief Visual Officer and then we've built up that team quite a bit since then.

Katie Priebe: Cool. So as a consumer, like with your experience at General Mills and Target even, with those brands, did you see those organizations go through issues, not that you were involved in it at all, but just to watch General Mills have an issue or Target unfold. Any thoughts on that?

Dexter Davis: Yeah. I would say, if you're staying specific from a social media perspective, I didn't see much of that. I mean, the breach of Target happening after I left Target, but everybody's learned from that and everybody has contingencies and that's why risk mitigation is such a big deal. For us, here in General Mills and other places too because that was a good learning lesson for everybody, I would say [inaudible 02:40] but I would say the biggest thing I would see from a crisis standpoint is really from a supply chain management perspective. When a vendor has a recall of so many products when everyone knows we're going to have to figure out a contingency with these and that's really a crisis, and it's a communication thing, but it's just not in the social media.

Katie Priebe: Right. Yeah. No definitely. Yeah. Actually, we had dealt with an issue a couple months ago with what we call a smoldering or an oozing crisis where it doesn't maybe pop up right away, but over a period of time it's like, "Wow. This has become a really big issue with recalls or whatever."

Dexter Davis: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah, when you have to take product off the shelf because of a vendor that you source through the supply chain that does create a crisis in having contingencies and backup supplies and lots of support. So from a procurement perspective, that's only a key piece in the playing of risk mitigation and the crisis situation so you are prepared when those situations happen. Whether it's responding from a traditional crisis or from a social media whatever, we have to have lots of backup opportunity and backup agency that we can kind of work with on those kind of things.

Katie Priebe: So yeah, explain a little bit more about your role and your position and does that parallel ... Maybe you deal with risk?

Dexter Davis: Yeah.

Katie Priebe: You deal with risk.

Dexter Davis: Financial services, yes.

Katie Priebe: So tell me a little bit more about that.

Dexter Davis: Risk mitigation is pretty, pretty, pretty key in all the stuff that we do, especially in our contracts. We make sure we have data protection issue to protect our consumers from their data, then privacy policies as well that we make sure they have the level of security that we're looking for. So a big part of our negotiation is making sure that the vendors we use that could be sharing our data have a level of security, have a compliancy. We have a pretty thorough, rigorous process, I would say more rigorous than a lot to make sure that we're the right partners. It's really mitigating that risk. When you're in the field in financial services, you do something you breach people's privacy and breach people's ... All kinds of things. You can always think about life insurance that there could be things that could come out. It's really important that you have that risk mitigation process in place. That's a key ... That's probably a bigger piece of what we do in financial services than others I've heard of.

Katie Priebe: So if there were to be a breach of some sort, you would probably be in the war room for an issue, if it was a breach and--

Dexter Davis: If it was a contract that we'd negotiated, yes, yes we would. Yes.

Katie Priebe: So what are your thoughts on if your vendor screws up, is that you ... Not you per se, but your Securian's responsibility ... How does work? What are your thoughts on that?

Dexter Davis: I mean, you try to put protections in contracts to protect Securian or any organization from those kinds of things but, at the end of the day, from a perception perspective it's all sort of fallen out. So it's really about choosing those right vendors that you think from the get go and they have protections in the contract and having a good vendor management structure and processing place. Because once it gets to that point, no matter who it is, people obviously, whoever the organization with the deepest pockets are going to want to get their hands on you ... They don't care that was a vendor that was yours [inaudible 00:05:45].

Katie Priebe: Right. Yeah. So from a consumer's perspective, when you see a company go through an issue and you're a consumer of news and just listening and watching it unfold, is there a couple things that stand out to you if the organization did it right? For the United issue, for example. You watched that unfold, was that ... Did it change your perception of United, positively or negatively?

Dexter Davis: Well, it really did. But, obviously, I understand kind of all the factors going into place. You implemented operational excellence where everybody did ... Could be really efficient and people are just kind of going through what is kind of given to them. But I think the agility that people are gonna have to understand is that you may have some sort of procedure in place, but you gotta understand that the consumer is always watching and always listening. You have to be able to be more agile, say "Hey, we're going to go off script because we know this is not the right thing to do" and I think that's where they stepped down. And that's what you try to ... Because you could have all those systems and processes in place, but if you don't have people who are agile and understand how their actions affect the consumer, that's how you get yourself in trouble. I think other organizations could have the same processes, we lean on it, but if you don't have employees in power to do the right thing, that's what's going to happen.

Katie Priebe: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dexter Davis: And I think that's what's happened.

Katie Priebe: Yeah. I agree. Let's see. One other question - does Securian have a crisis plan at the corporate level, or ...

Dexter Davis: Yeah.

Katie Priebe: Okay. So you guys do have that.

Dexter Davis: Yup. Yup. We have a business [inaudible 00:07:23] that.

Katie Priebe: Do you reference that at all in your job, or not really?

Dexter Davis: Yeah.

Katie Priebe: You do?

Dexter Davis: Yeah, yup. I mean, that's a big part. We go through ... And we go through kind of drills or whatever if something were to happen. Who would do it, how we would protect things, so it happens. It's a pretty big deal.

Katie Priebe: Yeah.

Dexter Davis: Once again, financial services [inaudible 00:07:44] you never want either one. But if we do something or if something were to happen, we have a plan to go to mitigate that.

Katie Priebe: Anything else I miss that you want to mention? About this topic in general, or ...

Dexter Davis: I don't know. I think it's an interesting topic. I think looking at it from a social media, digital standpoint is evolving for everybody, I would say, but I do think it becomes part of your overall risk mitigation blanket.